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ABSTRACT

This issue contains 12 articles written by teachers who have investigated various aspects of the multilevel question in their own classrooms. "The Multilevel Question" (Lenore Balliro) provides an introduction. "Deconstructing the Great Wall of Print" (Richard Goldberg) investigates reading strategies that allow students with a wide range of reading abilities to work on similar material. "Multilevel Classes" (Lenore Balliro) offers 10 practical suggestions from classroom experience. "Putting the Pieces Together in a Multilevel Class" (Judy Waters) presents results from a quilt project in a multilevel class in English as a second language (ESL). "A Teacher Steps Aside in the Multilevel Classroom" (Emily Singer) recounts how a teacher turned a crisis situation into an opportunity for students to pull together as the teacher relinquished more authority in the classroom. "Learning to Cooperate/Cooperating to Learn" (Marta Mangan-Lev) examines why cooperative learning works in some ESL classes and presents obstacles in others. "Why Teach in Groups Instead of Individualized?" (Janet Stein) lists advantages of group work. "When the 'Tried and True' Doesn't Fit" (Cara Streck) considers when it is profitable to group students and when it is not. "A Baker's Dozen" (Joan Bruzzese, Nellie Dedmon) lists 13 reasons for individualized math classes. "What Does It Take?" (Martha Merson) focuses on ways in which learners may or may not take responsibility for getting their needs met in a multilevel class. "Not So Inexperienced After All" (Tom Lynch) and "Was It Worth It?" (Margaret McPartland) discuss experiences with staff development activities. Two columns answer teachers' questions about multilevel classes. (YLB)

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Connections: A Journal of Adult Literacy

Volume VII Summer 1997

Multilevel Classes

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Connections is a publication of the Adult Literacy Resource Institute, a joint project of Roxbury Community College and the University of Massachusetts/Boston, funded primarily by the Massachusetts Department of Education/Adult and Community Learning Services, the Massachusetts Higher Education Coordinating Council, and the City of Boston's BRA/EDIC/Jobs and Community Services Department.

The A.L.R.I. was created in 1983 as part of the Boston Adult Literacy Initiative and also serves as the Greater Boston Regional Support Center for the state's SABES (System for Adult Basic Education Support) network. The purpose of the A.L.R.I. is to provide training, technical assistance and other resources to Boston-area adult basic education programs. Our address is 989 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston, MA 02215. Our phone number is 617-782-8956; our fax number is 617-782-9011.

Connections is intended to provide an opportunity for adult educators, particularly those in the Boston area, to communicate with colleagues, both locally and nationwide. Adult literacy/adult basic education practitioners need a forum to express their ideas and concerns and to describe their students, their programs, and their own accomplishments; we are glad to be able to continue providing this opportunity.

We welcome your reactions to this journal or to any of the articles in it. We also want to strongly encourage teachers, counselors, administrators, aides, volunteers, students—everyone involved in this field—to think about sharing your experiences, your ideas, your problems and solutions with others by writing for the next issue of *Connections*. Please contact us; we'd be glad to talk with you about your ideas for an article.

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Introduction: The Multilevel Question

Lenore Balliro

In the thirteen-or-so years I have been involved in adult basic education, no issue has surfaced for classroom teachers as regularly as that of the multilevel class. Workshops devoted to this topic reliably draw big crowds at conferences and staff development centers like the Adult Literacy Resource Institute/SABES Greater Boston Regional Support Center, where I worked until recently as the ESOL coordinator. Jill Bell's book, *Teaching Multilevel Classes in ESL* has proven a perennially popular title in the A.L.R.I. library. Often, the multilevel issue surfaces soon after teachers recognize the complex compositions of their classrooms. They are compelled to seek out practical solutions in the form of techniques and classroom management in order to successfully engage all the learners in their classes. Even veteran teachers, many of whom could teach their own workshops on the multilevel class, are intent on locating those elusive strategies (that must exist somewhere!) to address the challenges in their classrooms. New and experienced teachers alike display the same underlying, often implicit, assumption: I, the teacher, am the one responsible for meeting everyone's needs in my class.

The articles in this volume of *Connections* are written by teachers who have investigated various aspects of the multilevel question in their own classrooms. Before any of the writing started, though, a core group of teachers met to discuss their perceptions, concerns, and insights about the issue of multilevel classes. This discussion started with a reflection on personal experiences as a learner in a class or workshop where learners brought different abilities, interests, and strengths with them. From there, participants were encouraged to "unpack" the concept of multilevel by reflecting on what we mean when we talk about "multi" and what we should expect of ourselves as classroom teachers when presented with challenging situations because of these differences. A richer understanding of the term "multilevel" emerged, echoing and reinforcing other practitioner dialogues I have participated in over the years. This kind of discussion, often overlooked in the need for practical, immediate strategies, can help us think more globally about the concept of "multilevel"—where problems emerge and who should take responsibility for them.

Some of the "multis" described in this, and past, discussions with teachers were not related to "level" at all. These included: cultural differences (among students and between teacher and students); class differences (again, among students in home countries, between teacher and students), age differences, gender differences, differences in educational backgrounds, differences in student motivation, differences in ethnicity, differences in first languages, differences in learning styles.

Many of these differences, teachers reflected, do not present themselves as problems; rather, they enrich the communities of learners and are often the attraction for instructors to stay in this marginalized, poorly paid field. Teachers discussed how their lives and those of other students are enlarged by their experiences with students from a wide range of countries and backgrounds; it makes them continually challenge their own assumptions in a variety of contexts. In the *Connections* group, as well as in other sharing groups around the multilevel topic, not all teachers were in agreement that mixed abilities always presented a problem. Some teachers have suggested that when classes have a strong and clear identity, and when students learn to work in mixed proficiencies, there were fewer conflicts arising from mixed abilities. Looked at through this prism, "multi" becomes a strength rather than a deficit, and teachers often concur that working from strengths is the cornerstone of adult education practice.

Still, one cannot discount the areas where problems do exist, especially in the classroom where different proficiencies (language and literacy) are profound. One can argue that any classroom is really multilevel, because we all bring a range of abilities and aptitudes with us to any learning situation. Further, not everyone learns at the same pace, so some students become advanced more rapidly than others, soon creating a multilevel class. That's true. But the ESOL and ABE adult education class often displays magnified differences.

For example, in ESOL classes, the *Connections* group suggested, there may be students who speak fluently in English co-learning with others who may be beginning speakers of English, making it challenging to engage everyone in practicing English. Further, some students may be highly educated in their home countries and are learning to read in English as they learn to speak it; other students may be learning to acquire literacy for the first time, because they have not had much formal education in their home countries. The first languages of some students are alphabetic; others are not. In the ABE class, a wide range of reading abilities and experiences with print also shows up. Some students are ready to jump into the GED while others are ready for "pre-GED" work. Some may do fine with the reading components of the GED but are weak in math. Because students from other countries study with native born students, there is a need to explicate cultural concepts and background for some, while this is not necessary for others.

Teachers also noted other differences. In both ABE and ESOL classes, some students display more metacognitive awareness of their learning while others can't seem to step back and reflect on learning-to-learn strategies. Further, both ABE and ESOL teachers identify students with learning disabilities in their classes, which complicates the classroom composition even more. Teachers have suggested that because of these wide differences in abilities, some students are inevitably bored while others remain lost.

When pressed, many teachers admit that they try to meet everyone's needs in the class, all the time, even though they know it's ultimately impossible. It is with this implicit goal in mind that they plan their instructional strategies. Where does this pressing motivation come from? For several years, there has been a prevailing attitude and set of approaches in adult education that stress learner-centered pedagogy. Teachers are encouraged, and in some cases mandated, to develop an individualized education plan (IEP) for each student in their class in order to articulate each student's personal learning (and often job/career) goals. Teachers are reminded to assess learners' interests as well as abilities and to plan instruction to ensure that students' learning goals get met.

Starting from learners' goals and concerns is a good thing. However, many teachers may have taken learner-centered pedagogy too much to heart, unintentionally contributing to problems in the multilevel class. Faced with a multitude of learner differences in the classroom, teachers feel it is incumbent upon them to make sure each person's needs and goals are met, and that every learning difference is attended to. I don't think this is a reasonable expectation. But it's a hard one to escape from; in so many cases, teachers care passionately about the lives of their students. But having teachers who assume they can meet everyone's needs and students who think they are going to get all their articulated needs met, is a set-up; teachers burn out, students get frustrated. A great deal of negotiation has to take place within a multilevel class to ensure that reasonable expectations are outlined.

Further, though the field asserts the need for learner-centered pedagogy, there are simply not enough resources available to bring all student goals to fruition. There are not enough classes, not enough well-prepared teachers, not enough teacher aides or tutors, not enough counselors, not enough on-site day care facilities, and not enough technological support to handle the needs in the field. Examined from this perspective, it seems clear that some of the responsibility to address the complex challenges of multilevel classes rests with policy makers to establish realistic expectations while working with the limited resources we do have.

Program administrators also need to take some responsibility for addressing the multilevel issue. Programs might need to reassess, for example, their open entry/open exit policies. As one adult educator put it, "The class has a right to its own identity." If this identity is continually challenged and disrupted while students enter and exit, it disturbs the equilibrium the class struggles to achieve for optimal learning. Program administrators, in concert with teachers, may need to examine other kinds of grouping rather than proficiency (classes around certain topics, for example, or classes with the same first language). They may have to set limits for who can and cannot enter a particular class. They may need to build a stronger referral structure for students who are unable to access their services. These limits may help in setting more realistic guidelines for the composition of classes.

Yeah, but. Even when policy issues are set, even when it's clearly stated who can enter class and at what time in the cycle, many teachers in the field find it extraordinarily difficult to say "No." We're faced, often, with adult students for whom the system, in its many guises, has failed them, marginalized them, pushed them down. We are naturally inclined to welcome as many people as we can into class, and to work hard to provide a positive and supportive environment. But at what and whose expense? So the cycle repeats itself, and more and more teachers leave the field as a result of burn-out. It's hard to say no, but setting limits also preserves some energy that we need if we choose to do this work for the long haul.

THE MULTI-LEVEL QUESTION GROUP

The writings of teachers in this issue of *Connections* offer very different prisms through which we can glimpse the complexity of the multilevel question. Richard Goldberg, an ESOL instructor at the Asian American Civic Association, investigates reading strategies that allow for students with a wide range of reading abilities to work on similar material. Emily Singer, of the Worker Education Program sponsored by the Service Employees International Union Local 285, turns a crisis situation (imminent curtailing of funds) into an opportunity for a group of students with disparate levels to pull together in a valuable learning project. Emily also makes certain discoveries about her students as she relinquishes more authority in her classroom; the next time I teach my own class, I will re-examine my position of authority and responsibility in the multilevel class yet another time due to Emily's perceptions.

Marta Mangan-Lev and Cara Streck each investigates and writes about her experiences with grouping students. "Put students in groups" is a common refrain in multilevel classes—group according to similar ability, group "high" with "low" students, and so on—advice often glibly dispensed. Application of the principle of group work is often troublesome, though. Cara asks the question: when is it profitable to group students, and when isn't it? Do more advanced students get short-changed when they are continually called upon to help others? Marta looks at the use of cooperative learning in ESOL classes, examining why it works well in some cases and presents obstacles in others.

Martha Merson, co-editor of this volume, wears her teacher hat as she writes about her experience co-teaching in a multilevel math class. Drawing from her own experience in a recent workshop, and her reflections in the classroom, Martha focuses on the ways in which learners may or may not take responsibility for getting their needs met in a multilevel class. Judy Waters successfully engages a multilevel family literacy class in a satisfying quilt project which allows each student to contribute according to his or her talents and abilities. Each of these writers also offers a concise, hands-on classroom strategy that teachers may be able to adapt in their own classrooms.

Multilevel applies to the teaching force in adult education as well as to the student population. Teachers often enter the field from non-traditional avenues and bring a wide range of motivations and perspectives, as well as experiences in education, teaching methodologies, experiences with other cultures, proficiencies in languages, and so on. Tom Lynch and Margaret McPartland discuss their experiences with staff development activities within the multilevel arena of teacher development, including workshops, mini-courses, technical assistance, and on-line support.

Another feature of this issue of *Connections* is the appearance of Ms. Multi, the advice columnist who agreed to answer teachers' questions about multilevel classes. ESOL and ABE teachers pose sticky, recurrent questions to Ms. Multi, who does her best to offer practical advice as well as alternative ways of thinking through a problem. Ms. Multi has the same ironic tone as her cousin, Miss Manners, but she assured us that her responses are of the most serious nature.

Perhaps we can never fully meet the needs of all students in adult education classrooms. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't experiment, refine our techniques, and develop high standards and live up to them. Our students do deserve the best we can give them. Policy makers need to consider constraints and limited resources when they set policy guidelines; administrators need to design programs that set up optimal conditions for such a wide continuum of learners—accepting limits where they must rather than assuming they can service everyone's needs. Teachers need to make sure they get the best teaching preparation they can—both pre-service and in-service through on-going staff development—so they can draw on an ever-increasing range of solid teaching strategies informed by recent research and prevailing theories in language and literacy acquisition. And finally, students need to learn, through the modeling of their teachers and others, how to identify their needs and how to go after what they may not be getting in their multilevel class.

As teachers, if we can't meet each student's needs fully, perhaps we can strive, as former La Alianza Hispana teacher Annie St. John did, to "make students feel safe and challenged at the same time." •

Deconstructing the Great Wall of Print

Richard Goldberg

"Too many new words."
"There were many words I did not understand."
"I did not know some of the words."

These are typical responses I hear from students every day as we read in the ABE English Transitional Program at the Asian American Civic Association in Boston's Chinatown. Rarely does any discussion of reading begin with a focus on the content, the characters, the inferences, students' reactions to the author's point of view. For the Chinese adult learners in my classes, despite varying levels of education in Hong Kong or mainland China and length of time living in the United States, reading is, first and foremost, understanding the meanings of individual words. In four and a half years of full-time teaching at AACA, I have struggled with this situation, making little progress with students, most of whose experiences with reading in English involve "barking at print," reciting the words without understanding the meaning. In thinking of multilevel issues in my classroom, reading seemed an obvious choice. But as I tried out different reading strategies, and in reflecting on them for this article, I found that the class was a lot less multilevel than I thought when it came to reading. Even the students who could usually "get it" when trying to make meaning from a text were using the same strategies employed by the lowest level students. I will document some first steps aimed at moving students beyond word-for-word reading and vocabulary as the be-all and end-all of their reading schema. This will be a modest attempt to begin to change students' ways of thinking about reading in their new language.

The ABE English Transitional Program consists of three intermediate-level classes for immigrant adults who want to improve their English skills so they can continue their education in community colleges or skills training programs. I teach Levels 2 and 3. Like most classes of English for speakers of other languages, each class is multilevel. People with university degrees—former teachers, computer scientists and medical researchers—study alongside those who never finished high school in their native countries. Eighty to ninety percent of the students are female. As one male student told me a few years ago, "In the Chinese family, the men work in the restaurants; the women learn English." Most of the students say their goal is "to improve my English and get a good job" (usually meaning any kind of office work with benefits). Some have been in the United States for more than five years and are fairly confident speakers of English. Others are very new arrivals who may be afraid to speak but who are prolific writers with a decent grasp of English syntax. Reading seems to be the area which unites those at different levels in their inability to move beyond reading just for the words. Except for the occasional student who says she reads novels or newspapers, reading in English for most of these learners rarely goes beyond the closed captions of TV programs or videos. On the printed page the words are intimidating, so most students stay away.

In the ABE program, reading is not seen by teachers as a separate, disconnected skill but one that is closely tied to writing and discussion. During the first week of each cycle, students are asked to choose the content areas which they would like to study. The following subjects are among those selected in every cycle over the past four years: the American educational system, particularly higher education; health care in the U.S., particularly access to health care; changing roles in Chinese and American families, especially the notion of the non-nuclear family; and the nature of work in America, specifically getting a job and understanding expectations of employers and American co-workers. In my first few cycles, despite having students read what I thought would be relevant material, I would watch helplessly as they punched the buttons on their electronic Chinese-English dictionaries to get the meaning of each new word as soon as they came across it in a text. In the past two years electronic beeping has given way to the shuffling of pages in all-English dictionaries, but the results are the same. Students do not seem to look beyond individual word meanings. This leads to frustration and self-doubt about their reading and language learning ability.

Linking Theory to Practice

Despite students' levels of education in their native countries and their experience (or lack of it) in reading English, I have noticed that they approach reading as an attempt to scale a wall of print. Among the adjustments I am trying to make is to change the focus from the language to be comprehended to the role and state of mind of the comprehender. In their article, "Schema Theory and ESL Reading Pedagogy," Carrell and Eisterhold discuss the importance of background knowledge in language comprehension. This is presented as schema theory, where comprehending a text becomes an interactive process between the reader's background knowledge and the material (p. 556). And according to Clarke and Silberstein, more information is contributed by the reader than by the print on the page. That is, readers understand what they read because they are able to take the stimulus beyond its graphic representation and assign it membership to an appropriate group of concepts already stored in their memories (pp. 136-137). But these concepts are often culturally-based and culturally-biased, making it important for teachers to carefully choose materials that connect to their students' realities or to build schema with them, involving their background knowledge of the formal structures of different kinds of texts (poems, fables, short stories, newspaper articles, graphs, charts, maps, etc.), known as formal schemata. In the past, I have asked students to read things "cold." When teachers want students to manipulate both the linguistic and cultural codes (sometimes linguistically easy but culturally difficult, and vice versa), this kind of "cold" reading may be asking too much (Carrell and Eisterhold: 567).

To put some of these theories into practice, I tried a variety of strategies with my students as they were reading a particular story: 1) some free writing and discussion based on several issues raised in the text as a way to elicit students' background knowledge; 2) predicting key ideas raised in the text by using titles, idioms, the opening paragraph and the last sentence; 3) a post-reading activity that involved summarizing, remaining questions about, and students' reactions to the story. I'll admit that being part of this multilevel project prompted me to do a bit more preparation with pre-reading activities, since I had not employed all of these strategies in such depth with this particular text in past cycles.

The story concerned an Asian immigrant's experience in going to a community college. Although it took place in another part of the United States, it mirrored the immigration experiences of the students in Chinatown. First, we looked at the idioms "to take charge of something," from the title of the book, *Taking Charge of My Life,* and "something hit me," from the beginning of the story. We could not predict anything from the title, since the story had no title other than the name of its author, Josephine Thanhngoc Nguyen (pp. 129-131). Since there were no Vietnamese students in this class, I didn't ask anyone to see if they could tell anything from the name, although the author's name may suggest something about the writer.

The next step was a pre-reading activity that examined four issues in the story which were closely related to the students' lives (see box below).

Josephine Thanhngoc Nguyen

Before we read this story, look at the following questions:

1) If you go to college (this year or any time in the future), how will this decision change your life? What will be the barriers at home? At work? In the college classroom?

2) Does your family help you when you are having a problem in your life? How? Please explain.

3) "Women should not go to school and have a career. Women should stay home and take care of the family." Do you agree or disagree with these sentences? Please explain.

4) Are you the oldest child in your parents' family? Do you think the oldest child is different from the other children in a family? How? Please explain.

Now choose ONE of these questions. FREE WRITE for about ten minutes. Do not stop to look up words in the dictionary. (Don't worry about spelling. Just keep writing). Answer your question as specifically as possible. I will ask you to share your writing with the class.

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In thinking about, writing, and sharing their answers to these questions, students were able to draw from their extensive background knowledge of dealing with family problems, juggling the responsibilities of learning English and managing a household, setting an example as the oldest child, and especially dealing with lifestyle changes when deciding to go to college. As with any free writing, it is a good idea for the teacher to also write and share. The next step involved making predictions. I chose to give students only the first paragraph and last sentence of the story: The first paragraph read:

> Coming to the United States was one of the major assets that helped me get to college and my education. My strength and determination helped me overcome the obstacles I faced before me. These major obstacles were getting accustomed to a new country, its culture, its language, and dealing with my family's financial problems.

The last sentence was: "A little help will always make a difference in my future."

The theme of the opening paragraph was familiar to students, since many of them had written about their own adjustments to English, American lifestyles, and family financial difficulties. When the word "assets" came up, one student (a voracious reader) was able to give a credible definition. The phrase "overcome the obstacles" was also familiar to everyone, since each student had to put together an Individual Education Plan, a section of which focused on strategies to overcome personal barriers. By this time, I noticed that we had spent almost an hour and a half on pre-reading activities involving writing and predicting, reminding me of previous experiences where I, like so many other teachers, spent hundreds of hours helping students understand every word in a story rather than showing them strategies to help them get as much meaning as possible out of what they read. This reinforced my belief in the value of taking sufficient time before reading, rather than focusing immediately on all of the difficult words. Since the class was almost over, I gave students a few minutes to begin reading the story. There was not enough time to talk about the vocabulary. The following day I asked students to think about the story again by using a form which asked them to write a summary and any questions or reactions they had to the text.

There was some discussion about vocabulary, but much less than in previous reading assignments. I'm convinced that the choice of a culturally-appropriate piece, coupled with extensive pre-reading and the eliciting of important background knowledge, shifted student focus away from the "many new words" to a closer identification with the main character's struggle, which was so similar to their own.

Reading for Information: Other Texts

Readers read a wide variety of texts in real life—newspapers, magazines, billboards, mass transit advertisements, novels, textbooks—and they don't read all of these texts the same way. Another experiment involved giving students experience with formal schema, how different texts are organized and laid out. This idea was adapted from a workshop presented by Bea Mikulecky at the 1997 MATSOL spring conference. Students were asked to read to find small, specific pieces of information in a much larger text. First, each student received a copy of *The China News,* a free Chinese language newspaper available in the lobby of our agency. To get a better idea of their reading habits, I asked the students what they do when they read this kind of text. "We read the most important news first," someone said. "The lifestyles." "The local news because we live in Boston." "Entertainment, movie stars, singers, CD sales, food." "If I see something interesting, I will read every word."

After we established that most people don't read every word of a newspaper, students were paired off, with each pair receiving a copy of the Calendar section from a Thursday *Boston Globe.* Each group was given a few minutes to skim and scan, then report back to the entire group on something of interest. Next, each student received a vocabulary list (see box below),

Vocabulary

Features - Special sections of a newspaper or magazine
Skim - To look through a magazine, book, or newspaper quickly to see what is inside
Layout - How a magazine or newspaper looks (columns, advertisements, size of the words, headings, pictures...)
Bazaars - Places where you can buy used clothes, toys, furniture, like big yard sales
Benefits - Events to make money for a certain organization
Galleries - Places where you can look at or buy art
Theater - Drama, plays
Heading - Words at the top of a column in a newspaper or magazine to tell you what is included
Highlights - The most important parts (for example, highlights of my week, my vacation, or a book)

which included key concepts students would need to understand because they served as category headings. No other vocabulary lists were provided.The next step was to ask students to examine the Contents and Listings page at the beginning of the Calendar booklet and locate the pages of different sections: Dance, Theater, Music, Children, etc. Then each pair was given a list of questions (see box below) requiring very specific information: an event's location, day, time, and ticket prices, among other things.

This activity proved to be time-consuming, but it was interesting to observe that students were not reaching for their dictionaries, even when they were unable to find the answer to a question. Most were able to talk their way through a problem with their partner or the teacher. Before the class ended, it was good to reinforce with the students what they did—navigate their way through an enormous amount of information for something very specific, taking just what they needed from the text and without focusing on what they didn't know. Using different kinds of texts can be an equalizer for students in a multilevel classroom because those learners who are less comfortable with walls of print can use strengths other than individual word knowledge to extract meaning from the material.

One more reading activity proved worthwhile to help students move away from their dependence on a word-for-word approach to reading. It was similar to a cloze exercise, where about every sixth word was X'd out (see box on next page). The story was one that I wrote, based on the experience of Wan Ming, a student in the class who recently attended a job and training fair in her community.

First I asked students to read the story and ignore the missing words, although I noticed at least one student writing possible choices over each series of Xs. Later, I suggested that students try to substitute any words they thought would make sense. They had little difficulty with this, perhaps because they had received a flyer announcing the training fair a few days earlier. Although Wan Ming was the only one to attend, multilevel students were once again using their own background knowledge, since most of them had already investigated several training programs in Bos-

Reading the Globe Calendar

1) Look under THE WEEK section. Answer these questions: (HINT: Look at photographs too!)

- What day is Bobby McFerrin singing? Where is he singing? How much are the tickets?
- What date will Ladysmith Black Mambazo perform? Where will they perform?
- What famous dance company will return to Boston on Tuesday, April 22?
- What day is the "Animals in Art" show? Where is it?

2) You will have to look in different parts of the LISTINGS to answer these questions. (HINT: Use the HEADINGS).

- Where can you find a free story book and craft hour for children? (Heading to look under: ____________)
- What activity does the Boston Public Library offer for children on April 22? (Heading: ____________)
- What movies are playing this week at the Coolidge Corner Theater? (Heading: ________)
- Where is the Back Porch Dance Company? What is their phone number? (Heading: ____________)
- Where can children take April vacation art classes? (Heading: ____________)
- On what date can you see the dance *Swan Lake* by the American Repertory Ballet Company? (Heading: ____________)
- How much does the play *Hamlet* cost? Where is it? (Heading: ____________)
- How much do the New England Square and Contra Dances cost? (Heading: _________)
- Where can you see a concert with James Brown on April 18? What time does the concert start? (Heading: ____________)
- What famous scientist, inventor, and artist is featured at the Museum of Science? (Heading: ____________)

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Wan Ming Goes to a Job and Training Fair

Two nights ago, Wan Ming XXXX a job and training fair XXXX English High School in Jamaica XXXX. She lives near the school, XXXX it was very convenient for her. XXXX she arrived, she saw many XXXX giving out information for jobs XXXX training programs in the Boston XXXX. There were programs for office XXXX, resume writing, interview preparation, cover XXXX, and much more. There was XXXX a lot of information about XXXX kinds of jobs, such as XXXX, packing, assembling, supermarket and office XXXX.

The next day, Wan Ming XXXX the information to her ABE XXXX at the Asian American Civic XXXX in Chinatown. She gave her XXXX copies of the job and training XXXX flyers. Some of her classmates were XXXX interested in the training programs. XXXX were familiar with the training XXXX, but they enjoyed learning about XXXX kinds of jobs. Now Wan XXXX and the other students have XXXX choices when they finish the Level XXXX class on April 25.

ton. They knew the kinds of activities and materials they would find at a training fair. As I watched, students (even those who usually had the most difficulty with reading) breezed through the story, taking in more of its global meaning rather than stopping to figure out which words were missing. They liked this activity and felt a sense of accomplishment that came with the confidence of being comfortable with the content schema of this kind of text.

Conclusions/Reflections/Looking Ahead

Looking back at my experiments with these different approaches to reading, I found that students could see that reading involves more than just vocabulary. Here are some reflections about some of things that worked and how I could build on them in future cycles:

- *Extensive use of pre-reading strategies:* skimming, scanning, predicting from titles or headlines, and free writing/sharing around issues raised in the texts. The importance of these types of activities to bring out students' background knowledge (both content-based and culturally-based) through writing and discussion before reading should not be underestimated.
- *Realizing that there are many kinds of printed texts: everything does not have to be in paragraph form.* As in the *Globe* Calendar activity, the direction of the reading was often from the top of the page to the bottom, or from bottom to top, not just from left to right. This supported my belief in using alternative texts—charts, graphs, tables, maps, cartoons—where meaning can be made from numbers and pictures, not just words. Using these texts can level the playing field of multilevelness, emphasizing the strengths of visual and spatial learners, as opposed to those students with big vocabularies.
- *Using a variety of texts on one subject.* In our Level 3 class, we spend about a week (and sometimes more) on issues concerning the changing nature of work in America: downsizing, "flexible/disposable" (part-time and temporary) workers, workers' rights, the glass ceiling, sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace, and what different kinds of workers—blue collar, white collar, housewives—think about their jobs. This is an excellent opportunity for students to see the value of building background knowledge in content areas and to relate ideas found in different texts to each other.
- *Taking more risks with students in reading.* In the upcoming cycle, I will experiment with an out-of-class reading project where students will choose a short story or a long newspaper/magazine article, read it on their own, and discuss it in small groups or make a presentation before the entire class.

I hope all of these ideas will, in some small measure, make the printed page a little less intimidating to my students. Building on the strengths of what they already know and what they bring to a text, I feel more confident about exposing them to a range of reading strategies and materials, while being a little less concerned about their multilevelness, deficits, differences and problems to be fixed. •

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How Americans Use Their Leisure Time

Instructions: (Each group gets the same instructions but receives a DIFFERENT chart (Friday, Saturday or Sunday).

1) Look at the chart you received. You will see some of the most popular activities for Americans. Read all of the activities. The numbers mean the percent of Americans doing this activity on that day.

2) Make a list of the activities which you think would require physical exercise.

3) Add the numbers for all of the physical activities on your list.

4) After you finish, you will be put in another group where students looked at a different day. Talk with members of your group (and then the other groups) to see on which day Americans do the most physical activities when they have free time.

Possible Pitfalls: Make sure the group discussions stay in English. It is easy for homogeneous groups to slip into their first languages. Keep people moving so that each group member sits with the other groups who examined the other two days of the week. In this way, students are teaching each other. (IMPORTANT—Each group gets only ONE chart—Friday, Saturday or Sunday. Students don't see the charts for the other days until they move to another group).

Why It Works With a Multilevel Class: Even lower-level students could identify with many of the activities. The focus of the activity moved away from vocabulary to comparing and contrasting leisure time activities in the students' native cultures. It also helped build skills of categorizing many different activities into larger leisure time groupings. Students also worked on developing the skills of how to make inferences.

FRIDAY	
Television	28.7%
Socializing	8.9%
Reading	4.6%
Do-it-yourself	4.0%
Shopping	2.6%
Eating out	2.2%
Watching movie	2.1%
Vacation	1.8%
Time outdoors	1.6%
Gardening	1.5%
Sewing, knitting	1.3%
Self-improve.	1.3%
Team sports	1.2%
Hobbies	1.1%
Spectator sports	1.1%
Swimming	1.1%

SATURDAY	
Television	26.6%
Socializing	8.4%
Shopping	6.1%
Do-it-yourself	5.0%
Reading	4.6%
Time outdoors	3.3 %
Swimming	1.6%
Vacation	1.5%
Golf	1.4%
Eating Out	1.3%
Watching movie	1.3%
Fishing	1.2%
Gardening	1.2%
Cooking, baking	1.1%
Hobbies	1.0%
Team sports	1.0%

SUNDAY	
Television	26.2%
Socializing	8.3%
Reading	4.3%
Time outdoors	3.4%
Religious activ.	2.7%
Vacation	2.1%
Shopping	2.0%
Do-it-yourself	2.0%
Volunteer work	1.8%
Eating at home	1.7%
Gardening	1.7%
Hobbies	1.5%
Water skiing	1.4%
Swimming	1.3%
Eating out	1.2%
Watching movie	1.1%
Fishing	1.1%
Team sports	1.1%
Spectator sports	1.1%

—Richard Goldberg

Multilevel Classes: Some Practical Suggestions

Lenore Balliro

Experienced teachers have learned a great deal over the years about making multilevel classes run more smoothly and inclusively. The following suggestions have been distilled from my own classroom experience as well as years of working with other teachers who have helped inform my practice.

1) Name the differences: Once a classroom begins to solidify as a learning community, it becomes clear that there is a wide range of differences in the class: skin color, first languages, experiences, interests, education, and so on. By naming and talking openly about the differences in the class, there is a better chance to "exploit" the richness inherent in those differences.

2) Clarify realistic goals: By negotiating realistic shared learning goals with students from the beginning, there is less likelihood of false expectations driving students and teachers crazy. Students' individual learning plans might look strikingly similar to one another as they reflect common goals among the class; however, the teacher may be able to work with each student on one or two articulated goals that are specific to that student alone, especially if she can utilize support staff in the classroom. Once realistic learning goals are established, experienced teachers find ways to check in with students regularly, even if informally, to help them note progress in various areas. With regular assessment, students with a range of abilities can see that they are progressing at their own pace.

3) Encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning: By assisting students in becoming assertive "consumers" of their own education, teachers are providing transferable skills for students to become more active in getting what they need out of a class. Addressing the importance of student responsibility early on in the learning cycle contributes to clearer expectations in teaching and learning—again, taking some pressure off of the classroom teacher. A few years back, Andy Nash, then an ESOL teacher in a workplace setting, devised a creative lesson for addressing student responsibility issues. She created an activity where students discussed the following sentence starters:

- A good teacher should ___________
- A good student should ___________

Then they translated their statements into ground rules for the class, stating clearly and publicly on newsprint:

- We (the students) will__________
- The teacher will _____________

Many of these ground rules described taking responsibility for homework, participation in class, and other aspects of reinforcing classroom learning.

4) Wean yourself away from text-dependent activities: This is especially helpful for ESOL classes where approaches to teaching do not rely heavily on words. For example, try doing science experiments (like planting and growing seeds), cooking in class, or art projects (paper quilts, photo projects, pumpkin carving). This is not to say that the activities avoid language—not at all! But the *initial* focus on *doing* something rather than *reading* something allows the language to emerge from the participants. You can elicit language from the students as well as offer clarification by way of new language. During the activity, everyone can be involved in some fashion, whatever their language abilities. This approach levels the playing field a little. You may want to follow up with more structured language practice based on the experiential activity: a multilevel language experience story, or pair work for reading and writing. (Thanks to teachers at the Jamaica Plain Community Center for some of these ideas.)

5) Adapt videos: Choose movies, movie excerpts, TV shows, commercials, soap operas. Select materials with a strong narrative or story and vivid characters so the dialogue does not have to carry the entire meaning and students of varying abilities can still participate in the viewing experience. Humor and slapstick work well, as do movies that connect to students' own histories. (*I Love Lucy* is always a hit; Charlie Chaplin offers silent movies to "flesh out" with language.) Develop listening, speaking, reading and writing activities around the viewing segment, depending on what students can handle.

6) Use a topic driven, rather than a skills driven curriculum: Negotiate with students which themes or topics they would like to see addressed in the curriculum. This way, students can be united around a topic in which they all share an interest. After initial introductions of lessons, students can branch off according to abilities in various areas.

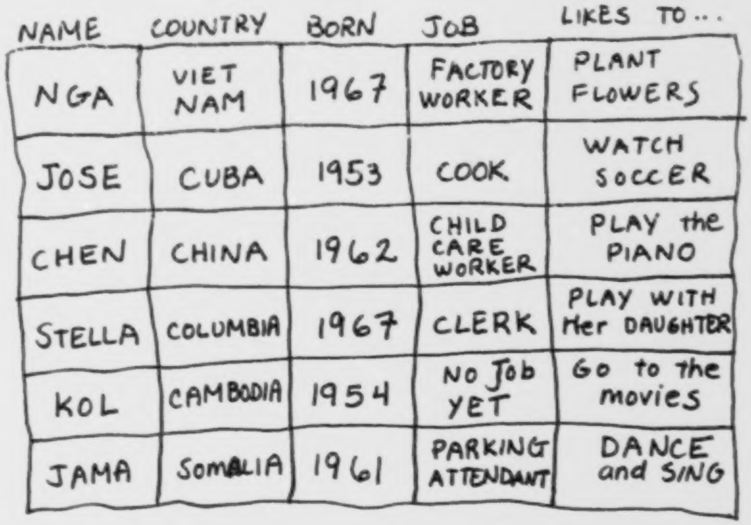
7) Use grids and other open formats: The use of grids with simple headings (see sample grid below) allows you to elicit language from students as a whole class activity and can be adapted to a wide variety of subjects (immigration histories of students, job/work information, families). This approach is especially valuable for ESOL classes. After a grid is filled in with student information, the teacher can then use the information with students of different language abilities, from asking simple Wh— questions to suggesting more detailed writing assignments. Everyone starts out with the same distilled information and it is allowed to expand according to students' abilities in the class.

8) Create long term projects: Some teachers help their classes create a simple newsletter that is published every few weeks. Others develop video projects. Some create cookbooks or publications of student writings. Long term projects allow students to assume responsibility for leadership roles and other tasks, depending on strengths and interests. Students can participate in a variety of ways and all contribute to a unified effort with an actual end result.

9) Teach to different groups at different times in the curriculum: Some teachers find it helpful to teach with an emphasis on the more proficient group of students at certain points in the cycle and to the less proficient at other times in the curriculum. Such an approach bypasses the tendency to always teach "to the middle." If teachers opt for such an approach, it's best to be clear with students what you are doing so they do not feel they will be left out entirely.

10) Allow for a range of learning styles: Sometimes students process their learning silently. Silence does not necessarily indicate boredom, confusion, or passivity. Try to find out what the silence means. It is also helpful to investigate with students how they learn best so teachers can help students work from strengths.

More opportunities need to exist for teachers to educate one another about these strategies and their underlying feelings about teaching in a multilevel class. •



NAME	COUNTRY	BORN	JOB	LIKES TO...
NGA	VIET NAM	1967	FACTORY WORKER	PLANT FLOWERS
JOSE	CUBA	1953	COOK	WATCH SOCCER
CHEN	CHINA	1962	CHILD CARE WORKER	PLAY the PIANO
STELLA	COLUMBIA	1967	CLERK	PLAY WITH Her DAUGHTER
KOL	CAMBODIA	1954	NO Job YET	Go to the movies
JAMA	SOMALIA	1961	PARKING ATTENDANT	DANCE and SING

Putting the Pieces Together in a Multilevel Class

Judy Waters

A room full of students who are actively engaged and busy working on the same project can bring a rare sense of harmony to the multilevel class. This scene stems from a hands-on, visual project that took place in my family literacy class at the Jackson Mann Community Center. The first time I saw my students all busily cutting, gluing, and conversing, there was a change in the dynamics in the room. For me as an adult education teacher, that change led to new ways of looking at my students and at the question of the multilevel class.

This hands-on project has been a focus of mine as part of the Multilevel Question Research Group, in which I participated this year at the A.L.R.I./SABES Regional Support Center. I was drawn to the group in February of 1997, after teaching a multilevel class ranging in level from preliterate to college educated, a class which I am still teaching at Jackson Mann. All students are second language English speakers.

Multilevel classes were not new to me as an ESOL teacher. However, the ever-present question of how best to teach a multilevel class surfaced and resurfaced with each new lesson. The same concerns were always brought up: Are all students benefiting from the activities? Are some students restless, some lost? Is there one activity or curriculum that works best? Are teachers trying to reach unattainable goals? These questions, and the questioning faces of my students, led me to the research group, as one more effort to examine this teaching challenge.

A Family Literacy Setting

Family literacy classes are offered as part of the Adult Education Program at Jackson Mann. Classes meet twice a week, in the evening, for a total of six hours. All students are from the Allston/Brighton area. The ages of students range from late twenties to early fifties. Most are employed in low wage work, although there are variations in income. A few stay home full time to care for young children. Ages of children range from toddler to late adolescence. There is a mix of single parent and two parent families. The class numbers approximately 7-10 students in attendance each night, and enrollment is open. Some students leave for periods of time and then return. Attendance can be inconsistent; often when children are sick parents miss several classes in a row.

Educational backgrounds vary from no primary education to undergraduate degrees earned in the native country. Languages include Spanish, Cambodian, Portuguese, and Cantonese. Levels of English proficiency vary from spoken language only to intermediate proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking. There are many different learning styles, and some students have barriers to learning which stem from experiences in their country.

Learning readiness is an area of considerable need for many students and reflects an important focus of the mission at Jackson Mann. Some students are struggling with being able to socialize and feel safe in a new environment. All students cite learning English and improving grammar and conversation as their primary interest in joining the class.

There is a community feel to the class. Parties are held on holidays with everyone sharing food that the students have made. Respect for the many differences among us is often brought up.

Many different models exist for family literacy, including those where parents and children do literacy activities together. At Jackson Mann, an evening literacy class for parents, with childcare provided, best serves the needs of our families, many of whom are balancing a heavy schedule during the week. Parents attend class while their children (if also attending) are cared for by a babysitter.

The philosophy of the program is that, through improved literacy, parents will be more able to help their children learn at home and to advocate for them at school. Special workshops on parenting and literacy are held throughout the year, in addition to the regular classtime. One workshop this year, led by Lenore Balliro and Sandra Darling of the A.L.R.I., focused on books for children and literacy activities to do with children at home. A series of four "Families First" workshops, held in the evening, with dinner and childcare provided, dealt with communication between parent and child. In addition, there were two Family Nights, which offered an arts and crafts evening, and a Health Night. These nights also included dinner and childcare.

After getting to know my students and the program better, I began to think carefully about the many "multis" in this class. How to mesh some of these with a coherent lesson plan? How to tailor the teaching of the class? My most important concern was a quality class experience for each student. What things would work? Most students were focused on the teacher as the center of the activity and learning, not an unusual situation in an ESOL class. School experience for most had meant a very traditional classroom in their native country.

With this context in mind, some objectives for me after coming to the program in September were:

- Teacher as facilitator
- A cooperative learning effort
- A format which engages all levels.

Setting the Framework for a Quilt Project

The idea of a quilt project had some appeal as a way to address the multilevel question. Hands-on activities had worked before in my class, with a clothing lesson, in which I brought in items of clothing to show and use to learn new vocabulary. However, the quilt would be a more ambitious project, working with a professional, and would be long-term, not a one-night activity. By its nature, it would require a high level of activity and participation. The intrigue would lie in its emphasis on the visual and spatial, not on the verbal, as a whole class activity.

A project of this nature would involve a change in basic format. Would my students attend and participate? Would they learn language skills? How would they feel about sewing and craftwork as the central class activity? Therefore, the first questions I would be considering in my teacher research were:

- Could a quilt project hold students' interests?
- Could all levels participate?
- Would it succeed?
- What would be the criteria for success?

Additional questions that would be looked at during this project were:

- What would it demonstrate about hands-on activities in the multilevel class?
- What would be some of the unexpected results of a project like this?
- Would it accommodate the context of family literacy?

Our class was fortunate enough to be working under the direction and supervision of Clara Wainwright, an artist and quilter who has been involved in many Boston area projects, including First Night. Clara contacted Jackson Mann administrator Diane Joyce with the idea of the project. My class was suggested, and I was open to trying new ideas. Quilting activities had been written about in the literature and had always posed a curiosity for me. However, I had never tried a project of this proportion.

When the project was first discussed, there was uncertainty on the part of both the students and myself. When I explained the idea of the project to the students, they seemed interested but still very uncertain about exactly what was involved. There was no spoken objection, but I wondered if to some extent they were accepting the idea because the teacher was proposing it. In some ways, I was just as unsure as they were. We had two nights a week to devote to our many language learning goals and to various parenting topics. How would this project fit in with the needs of the students? I had not been able to meet with Clara to discuss objectives for the class or any other issues that might come up. However, I remained open to any ideas that might work with the family literacy class, with its wide ranges of skill levels, cultural backgrounds and family compositions. I had read about Clara's work in a recent article, which helped to secure my confidence. I felt it was important to give the project a chance. Perhaps it would provide the class with a learning tool, and also with the feeling of comfort that could come from a traditional, handmade quilt.

The project was discussed with students in early February, two weeks before it actually began. Vocabulary was introduced with words like quilt, material, design, square, etc. I did find some library books on quilting to show to the students, and though the pictorials were vivid, the reading and language were aimed at a native level proficiency in English. Drawing a sketch of a quilt on the board was helpful. I let students know that we would be using this project to help to learn English, although at the time I was not exactly sure what methods would work. The quilting would take place once a week, and leave one night for other

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activities. On those nights, we continued with our regular format, although some time was spent discussing the previous night's quilting. Those nights we continued with a mix of computer time, group instruction, and small group work. A few times we worked on activities related to reading and making a newspaper.

On her first night, Clara brought in a quilt she had made with another class in Dorchester. Her purpose that night was to simply show the quilt and meet with the students, who were very impressed with her work. The second week she brought materials for the students to make their own "practice" square—a good way to help prepare students for the larger project. By this time, we had talked about what a quilt was, and most students were familiar with it and had examples to describe from their own countries. Preparation for the project was critical in helping all students feel comfortable about trying out a new skill and getting used to a change in class activities.

The quilt project spanned several months of work and was divided into segments of activity. The time line chart below outlines the activities for each month. The theme of the quilt was based on "visions for the year 2000," seen through the eyes of immigrant students. Students had to depict their homelands as well as their goals and wishes for the future. Each month presented a different task and a different square to be made. In the last month, a writing portion was incorporated and the activity was group quilting, also known as the "quilting bee."

Under Clara's direction, students would be constructing two squares, each approximately 15" x 15", one to represent their homeland, and one for their future visions. Clara provided the idea for the main themes and the structure and size of the quilt. She also encouraged a process where shapes would be made directly from the mind's image, without a drawing or diagram, although students could use whatever method worked best for them.

For students who seemed unsure about what they would do with their squares, Clara suggested images of houses or childhood memories. Some students created mountain scenes, water, houses, trees, fruit, a farmer, and faces of women. After the squares were designed and shapes of fabric glued to form the picture or scene desired by the student, Clara would take the squares to her studio and have them sewed. Each week, she returned with the squares, and students continued on to the next step.

After students had finished the squares of their homelands, Clara made up the outer border of the quilt; a "river" of water (turquoise material), which separated the outer border from the inner section of squares. This inner section depicted students' visions of the future. Again, Clara made suggestions about what the squares might look like. She asked questions such as "What would you like in the future? Do you see a house? A garden?" Some students seemed to need the suggestions and Clara's guidance to help them focus on the task. Other students were more self-directed and

Time Line For the Quilt Project

	First Month	Second Month	Third Month	Fourth Month
Topic	Define project	Your homeland	Your future	Finish/Give Title
Preparation	Discuss project. Use visuals of quilts; Present stories. Relate to literacy.	Think about a picture of your native country or a place you remember there.	Discuss theme of quilt and relate to students' lives. Think about future goals and wishes.	Think about title for quilt. Discuss finishing. Prepare for "bee."
Materials	Drawings, pictures, books, fabric, glue, scissors.	Fabric, scissors, glue, vocabulary list.	Fabric, scissors, glue, writing materials, indelible markers.	Needles, thread, scissors.
Activities	Meet with quilter. Bring in craft object. Make practice square. Take home for own use.	Discussion. Make first square—homeland.	Make second square—the future. Write about future. Transpose writing to square.	Quilt and sew on title. Write on message. Discuss display. Commemoration. Follow up.

quickly came up with their own ideas One square was a small shop, one a graduating cla[illegible]ith caps and gowns, one a scene from nature.

The Creative Process

How would students who were at different levels in their skills respond? How would the project meet different needs? The task of representing one's country visually with fabric demanded a creative and thoughtful process involving both abstraction and imagination, which students approached in a variety of ways. A few students were self-directed, while students at all levels assisted each other. Assistance was usually in the form of suggestions, ideas, and encouragement spoken in English or the native language. Some people asked questions about others' work, such as, "Where is your background?" or "Why don't you try this?" Several beginning students started out very hesitantly, but soon became very involved with the design process. Two students at the preliterate level eventually chose their own materials and told us what they would like to see in the square (a mountain, a tree, a bird, an animal). At times they required help with cutting shapes, but they manipulated pieces of material to their satisfaction. One student pointed to parts of the square and stated, "This is a mountain in Cambodia; this is a tree in Cambodia." Another student looked over and agreed, identifying scenery particular to Cambodia.

Two beginning level students made houses and gardens, with help from both Clara and me. One included a basketball hoop outside for the student's teenaged son; this was an idea that I suggested, knowing that her son played basketball. A concern of mine for the beginning level students was that they were not given the time needed to create original designs from beginning to end on their own. However, the smiles on their faces after seeing some shapes that Clara had helped them cut out were encouraging. Two students in particular were very shy and spoke very little English. I took note of any activities that generated smiles and communication, hoping to rely on these later for future activities. In addition, I had to recognize that some students needed a great deal of support due to learning disabilities or other obstacles that challenged them in the classroom setting.

One advanced level student expressed interest in more vocabulary learning with the project, which I provided. More emphasis in this area during the preparation period would have strengthened the vocabulary component. Another student, Angela, a college educated woman from Peru, created a very sophisticated theme with both of her squares. She used her material to represent the effects of pollution on air and water, and depicted this in a very elaborate way with raindrops, clouds, rainbows, and tears. Some students created images of houses; one square was a very detailed, perfectly proportioned picture of an ancient Mayan figure. Some squares were pictures of a single person or icon, usually a woman or a farmer.

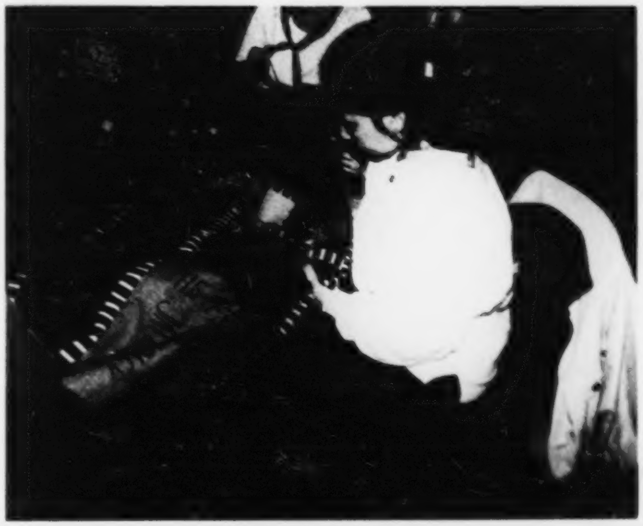
There were many different expressions of love and pride for the native country by students of all levels. A design could be very simple, such as a single woman in native dress or hairstyle, or more complex, such as Angela's tears for the environment. A design such as a woman in braids or a bowl of fruit could be construed in many different ways. Deep feelings about the native country or culture appeared to stir during the collage portion, although the complexity of the responses may not always have been depicted "on the surface" of the square.

Although students helped each other out, they often stayed within their familiar pair or group. Students who usually worked independently continued to do so. Overall, students of various levels managed well-thought-out, expressive designs, such as a picture of capped and gowned graduates holding degrees, or a panorama of sky and water, although students with low confidence and social skill levels often got off to a slow start on conceiving an idea for the square and beginning the collage process.

Effects on Instruction

Vocabulary: During the project, students used a variety of verb patterns and new vocabulary. Verbs that were introduced included: borrow, cut, sew, glue, lend. "Could you lend me...?" and "Could I borrow...?" were differentiated by one advanced level student in speaking to other students during the cutting and gluing. Nouns, such as material, fabric, background, clouds, and border, were used and practiced during the collage process. Question patterns such as "Where is...?" and "Do you have...?" were practiced in conversation at tables during the making of the squares. Conversation took place throughout the cutting of the squares both in English and the native languages.

Although students seemed interested in learning vocabulary associated with the quilt, the vocabulary handout which I prepared did not seem to spark a lot of interest. It included words like cut, sew, thread, needle, diagonal, straight, stitches, etc. There were also little illustrations for many of the words. It wasn't until there was a need for a new word to be learned, however, such as during a particular quilt activity, that the vocabulary seemed to have much significance. Everyone wanted to know the words "needle" and "thread" when the final sewing was done during the quilting bee. Up to that point, students had been gluing rather than sewing, and there was little interest in learning about a needle during that time. They were busy with the collage process, and perhaps written vocabulary was not a task to be focused on at the time. In a way, it took the emphasis off active and onto more passive learning. Would I use a vocabulary list again? Probably yes, for the few more-advanced level students who made specific requests. However, it would not be a priority method for learning the new vocabulary. The active learning process was more of an impetus for new vocabulary than any worksheet could have provided.



Writing Activities: Two advanced level students worked together to write up a one-paragraph report on the project, which was featured in the family literacy newsletter. One student wrote a thank-you letter to Clara. One new student was a little unsure about jumping into the sewing and cutting, although with Clara's help she made a square about a shop where she would sell fish. When she was through with that square, I asked her to write about what another student was doing during the project, while she waited for the next stage of activity. She wrote:

> Sarita is working on the quilt. She is making
> a house. She used cloths with colors black,
> red, green, waith, light blue. She make quilts
> in her country. She make house in her
> country. She like making the quilt because
> she feel relax making that.

This type of short writing task was helpful to fill in "gaps" in the activities, which occurred infrequently.

Writing on the Squares: When it came to the written quilt squares, students were asked to write about their memories, dreams, or the future. Each student had a square or two in which to write out with indelible marker a statement or message about their dreams and hopes. Preparation for this activity included discussion about the topic several weeks in advance and a short writing assignment during regular classtime. When it came time to write on the material, students first practiced on an 8 1/2 x 11 piece of paper, writing in bold marker what they wanted to say. Then they then wrote directly onto the fabric.

This piece of writing represented one of the most intense periods of project activity. Children helped out parents. Clara and I helped parents and children. Some students seemed intimidated by writing on cloth. Clara helped them to feel comfortable, focusing at first on message over mechanics, although the final product needed to be as clear and legible as possible. Most students needed help and support from both Clara and me when it came to constructing their sentences and ideas. We asked, "What is important to you when you think about the future?," stressing the words "goal," "wish," and "want." I asked individual students, "What do you see for you and your family in five years, ten years?"

With continued encouragement, students began to write, first on their practice paper, then on the fabric. Some students dictated their message to Clara or me for the first draft and continued on to a second draft on their own. One 11-year-old daughter helped her mother, who had little reading or writing experience. More advanced students wrote with less hesitation; some were able to construct well-revised versions of their first drafts. Although beginning-level students were initially overwhelmed by the writing task, more advanced students enjoyed this segment, putting to practice some of their skill in describing their countries and their dreams.

For students less experienced in writing, this was an opportunity to practice in a very contextualized form. Those who were nervous at first eventually wrote on the material with more confidence. There was a need for students to try to put ideas together in a compact, coherent message that would both convey their sentiments and speak to the subject, stressing conciseness and sentence structure. At the same time, there was lots of room for individual expression.

Participation and motivation were very high during this phase. Luz's 14-year-old daughter, who had attended especially for the quilt project, brought her square to me and showed me her comments about the future of the environment and her interest in trees:

> The picture I made is about what trees mean
> to me. The trees in my countrie are not that
> colurful but they are trees. I think there
> schould be more trees in world beccuse they

> help us breathe good air.

Another student, Marta, wrote of memories:

> I remembered the special place in the yard, under the big tree where I played with my friends in my country, Columbia, when I was a little girl.

One student wrote a message about "What is your dream?"

> My dream is some day to be again with my family, and for each person to find God, to be happy, and that way the world will find peace.

Skills Involved in the Quilt Project

Skill	*Activity*
spatial	collage design/ overall pattern
question patterns	obtaining help & materials
vocabulary	identifying materials, shapes, designs
conversation	offering suggestions, quilting "bee" chat
writing	message square
social	helping others, quilting "bee"
critical thinking	symbolizing homeland & future, naming quilt

Revelations about Students

Students approached the quilt project in entirely different ways. Some were thoughtful, some frustrated, some hesitant, some quiet, and so on. Some students finished several squares, while others managed one. Some were very controlled while others were more exploratory and did more "free associating."

Angela, in her confident way, went ahead with something very unique. She didn't spend any time worrying about whether her piece was a work of art; she simply put it together and was more concerned about the overall message rather than the perfection of the artwork. Marta struggled to work without a drawing during the collage portion, eventually succeeding. All along, she was critical of her work, seeming to be looking for some indefinable quality about her childhood memories. I was concerned about the struggle she was experiencing, but I knew that this was also a good experience for her to work out on her own. Elena humorously talked about her lack of artistic ability, although her image of a Brazilian woman with hair piled high and fruit on her head was highly stylized.

For Luz and Anna, there was painstaking changing of little bits and pieces here and there, with disapproving looks on their faces. They took considerable time in selecting their materials, looking them over and examining colors with scrutiny. They also watched others for long periods of time. They did not seem pleased with their designs when finished, although they seemed to enjoy the exploring process. Andrea, on the other hand, jumped into action and began putting together a rich, colorful tapestry image of mountains and sky with both ease and energy.

During the "bee," conversation flowed more than at any other time in the project. One very shy student, who had used the image of a dog in her square, said that she would like to have a pet, but was not allowed to by the landlord. This was another piece of useful information for me, suggesting the student's love for animals. Also during this activity students talked about sewing techniques they had learned in their country.

From a teacher's perspective, the project activities were instructive in helping me know more about each student's personality, individuality, and learning style—important information that might not have been revealed in the usual class format. I thought carefully about how no two students approached an activity in the same way—a reinforcement of the "multi" aspect of any task, despite the format?

I was also able to learn more about students' backgrounds, talents, and interests, in an informal, contextualized setting. For example, a very shy Cambodian student who rarely spoke mentioned during the "bee" that her mother was a seamstress and had taught her to sew when she was an adolescent. This was the first time the student had ever mentioned either of her parents, and until then, I had little knowledge of any skills she may have learned during her life. Knowing more about this student's history through an informal setting was helpful to me as a teacher. If she had been taught how to sew earlier in her life, she might have acquired other skills related to sewing, such as math or spatial skills. She could have more information to relate about her adolescent experiences, which could be used as a starting point in journal writing.

Shy students who had often seemed withdrawn came to class with improved affect following the finishing of the quilt. Conversation initiated by beginner students was more likely to take place after the quilt project. One student had commented during the "bee," while looking at her written passage on her country of Guatemala, "I wasn't sure about the project in the beginning, but now I am happy I did it." A sense of accomplishment was shared by everyone in the form of pleased looks and comments of satisfaction about the beauty and craftsmanship of the quilt. Some beginning students were less inhibited about writing after the project was finished. Actual improvement in writing levels was not clear, but the fear or hesitation that often accompanied writing for some students seemed to be reduced.

Student Participation

In all, sixteen participants worked on the quilt project, including five children and our childcare worker. Mani, the single male student in the class, did not participate in the collage process, citing the activity as being "more for the women." Clara and I did not pressure him to work with the fabric. We kept cultural factors in mind, and made sure the option was there for him to do other activities, such as work in the computer room with our tutor. No one was obligated to work on the quilt, though all the female students took part with interest. The female students did not seem to be affected by Mani's decision not to participate. There was a little bit of humor and some smiling, but otherwise there was no issue. Mani participated in the project later, after the squares were sewn together. He wrote the border message onto the "river" of water, using a piece he had written earlier about the meaning of success.

The quilting activities took place for one to two hours each Monday evening. Students who arrived late were able to make the transition into activities easily. Students who had to leave early could continue their work during the next class. If attendance was irregular, there was enough flexibility so that a square could be started and finished in a single class. Newly enrolled students could participate upon their first class, and any student could enter into the activities at any point of the project. One student who was absent during the period of the quilt-making due to her daughter's illness was the only female student who did not participate.

Our other night of the week, in which we did not work on the quilt, was used for grammar and other ESOL activities. However, discussion of the quilting always took place, whether to gather feedback, to talk about any questions the students might have, or to announce any changes in the quilt scheduling. (For example, if Clara would not be available on a certain week or day.) I felt it was important for the class to retain its regular ESOL format whenever possible to help remind students and myself that the quilting was a project that would be temporary and would not mean a new change in format. On our "non-quilting" night, I looked for signs of discontent, listened for complaints, and allowed time for feedback from the students. There were no voiced objections to the project, however.

Evaluating the Project

Did the quilt project address some of the objectives I had talked about earlier for the family literacy class?

1) *Teacher as facilitator:* One of the first changes that took place during the project hands-on was that the emphasis on the teacher as the source of activity for learning was lessened, and students were involved in independent work, either individually, in pairs, or in small groups. I was able to take on the role of facilitator while the center of action was with the students.

2) *A format to engage all levels:* All students who were present for the time period in which the project took place were engaged in the project, regardless of level.

3) *A cooperative learning effort:* A cooperative learning effort was demonstrated by exchange of ideas and suggestions, and by students helping each other out.

When first thinking about the project, I had also asked some additional questions, and I've been thinking about how to answer these.

1) *What could this project tell me about hands-on, visual activities?* I found that as a visual activity, the quilt project lent itself well to the multilevel class. I needed to look at some of the reasons why and to think about how to apply them to future classes. One reason that the project worked was that it was a visual, as opposed to a linguistic, activity. Although language and communication were an integral part of the activities, there was no reading or writing level in the target language that would preclude any student from participating. As a visual project, the target language was not at the center of its goals and objectives. Every student, from preliterate to advanced, could make a contribution. Another reason the project worked well was that it was open entry. Students could participate at their own pace, make the transition into the activities easily, and produce as much or as little of the craftwork as time and ability level allowed.

2) *Could the project accommodate a family literacy context?* As a family activity, the project allowed children and parents to work together. Children could make their own squares or help their parents with a square. Children who ranged from ages 5 to 11 were both invited and encouraged to work on the project. The collage process was age appropriate for the children and for the one teenager who participated.

3) *Would there be any unexpected outcomes of the project?* Though I was concerned that advanced level students might be less engaged since the focus was off grammar and literacy skills, most of the advanced students were engaged fully in the collage activities and used this time to make some very elaborate designs relating to the pride and love they had for their country. Critical thinking was one of the key elements of the

project that helped to engage all levels. For the advanced and intermediate level students, that critical thinking element provided a needed impetus and focus. When it came time for Elena, an advanced level student, to write about her hopes and visions for the future, she carefully crafted her passage so that it reflected something very personal yet universal. She needed to project her thoughts so that she could imagine what might take place and what might be relevant to her life. She began with a statement about the general welfare of children in the world. Her message finally said she wanted a college education and a good life for her daughters. For many students, working with the concept of the future required a sorting out of their thoughts and an analyzing of what the future meant to them. For some, this was not a familiar thought process. Looking at priorities and values was part of this work. What exactly did the future mean to them? Was it something concrete, like buying a car or a house, or something more reflective and abstract, like a good life for all, happiness, reward, tranquility?

Implications for the future would be to consider doing other projects with a visual emphasis. Before the quilt project came along, I planned to do a newspaper with the class. The few lessons I did try didn't have the same ease as the quilt project. If I return to that idea, I want to think about making it even more of a visual, hands-on activity. I would like to think more about target language components with the project, although I would do so cautiously. Could I combine more target language practice so that students can have the opportunity to strengthen subskill areas through the activity at the appropriate level? Would this compete too strongly with the visual aspect of the activity? Some trial period could be set up, but careful planning would be a requirement.

Many ESOL activities could be adapted to more open entry projects, such as language experience writing and response writing. However, the question of a level of skill in writing, or any other subskill, then returns and could preclude participation, especially in classes where levels begin with preliterate. The appeal of the visual is that it eliminates this problem, even if it does not accomplish other goals. Possible ideas for visual activities include painting, flower arranging, photo albums, paper quilts, drawing, papier mache, origami, pottery. The purpose and design of the activity need to be well prepared for the project to be accepted by most students.

Participation of mixed gender classes is another area for thought. Our class was predominantly female, and our male student was able to be involved in other activities. However, issues could arise around gender which could be addressed in the planning stages, with time allowed for some discussion or even a lesson planned around the question of cultural gender issues. It may be the case that some male students will not wish to participate in the sewing part of the project. There are other related activities, however, that they could do, such as taking photographs, helping with the hanging of the quilt, or reporting on the activities.

Conclusion

Was the quilt project a success? In terms of the finishing and crafting of the quilt, by all means yes. The "Family Literacy Dreams and Memories Quilt" is an exceptional visual experience, reflecting the creative, often hidden, talent of students. It also successfully provided a format in which all levels could participate. In terms of meeting the target language needs of each individual student, that may be more difficult to assess. Since the project is not structured around skill or level in English, this would not be an expected outcome. Objectives for hands-on, visual projects could vary from class to class, though. Meeting the target language learning needs of each individual student was not an objective for this particular project.

All students acquired or strengthened some spatial, memory, and basic conversation skills, in addition to the skills cited in the previous chart, though these may be areas more beneficial to lower level students. Grammar study, often cited as the main interest of more advanced students, was not an area that received focus in the quilt project. Even some beginning students seemed eager to get back to some more "traditional" activities.

Probably the most important achievement of the quilt project was that it provided a central focus for the class, something that we could all identify with as a shared experience. This has important considerations in a class where there are so many "multi" aspects. As a family literacy project, the quilt brought parents and children together in a shared activity. Although we had some doubts in the beginning, the quilt did create the sense of comfort and security I had hoped for early on. On display at Jackson Mann, it will now provide other families and children with a visual experience and a stimulus which helps to identify the concerns and hopes of immigrant students. In addition, the quilt helps to define the social and cultural contributions of the immigrant family and can act as a source of pride and achievement within that context. Students experiencing the quilt in this way may be more stimulated or motivated to pursue their educational goals. •

Clothing Fits Into ESOL

• ***What purpose does this activity fill?*** This lesson is used to help students learn vocabulary and conversation about clothing, including identifying colors and styles.

• ***What materials do you need to get started?*** A bag of clothing from home or thrift shop. A handout with written vocabulary and pictures of clothes. A board or easel and a marker.

• ***When would you recommend using this activity?*** This lesson may be adapted to any level and could be used as part of any ESOL curriculum. It is a good lesson to use when the class needs "hand-on" activity. It is helpful to do this lesson with a tutor, and access to a computer is also helpful.

• ***What are the steps in implementing the activity?***

1) Show clothing and allow students to touch and feel the different fabrics and textures. Discuss parts of clothing such as buttons, collar, etc. Name different types of clothing.

2) After looking at clothes and naming parts, ask a more advanced level student to write names, styles, textures, etc. on the board, while the teacher or another student shows that particular item. As a whole class activity, read what the student has written for oral practice.

3) Ask students to identify what they are wearing, then what another student is wearing.

4) Split the class into groups. The intermediate to advanced level can work on computer skills, practicing new vocabulary, independently or with a tutor. If a tutor is not available, the advanced group may work on a discussion of clothing and styles in their country, or comparing sizes and prices. Beginning level students can work on a role-playing scenario with a salesperson and a customer in a clothing store. Handouts and clear directions are helpful for group work.

• ***Possible pitfalls?*** Be sure to do a good "show and tell" job when showing clothes for the first time. Point carefully to the part you are naming. Allow enough time for "hands-on" looking at and touching of clothes.

• ***What should teachers pay attention to as their students participate?*** Teachers need to watch for student participation. Beginner students can look at clothes and practice saying new words. More advanced students should be able to compare different styles, textures, etc. Teachers should make sure students can practice the new learning in a safe environment.

• ***Why do you think this lesson is successful in a multi-level class?*** This lesson is hands-on and visual and satisfies student needs to apply conversation and vocabulary to practical use. It can be adapted to levels in various ways, with different tasks for beginning and advanced students.

—Judy Waters

A Teacher Steps Aside in the Multilevel Classroom

Emily Singer

I teach two small English classes at Columbia Metrowest Medical Center in Framingham as part of a workplace literacy grant funded by the Department of Education (DOE). My employer, the Worker Education Program (WEP), is a component of Service Employees International Union, Local 285, a labor union representing healthcare workers across the state. The seven students that participate work in the Housekeeping and Dietary Departments of the hospital and are all members of SEIU Local 285.

To accommodate the staffing needs of the departments, the two classes are organized by work-shifts. Three evening-shift workers attend the first class one hour prior to the start of their shift. Four day-shift workers come to the second class as their shift ends. We meet twice a week in a small audio-visual viewing room in the hospital library. As a result, classes reflect a full spectrum of typical adult learners, with wide differences in verbal and literacy abilities as well as varied experiences with formal schooling. This is truly a multilevel class.

Looking at the Multilevel Puzzle

It is my experience that there are certain challenges in teaching that require continual investigation. Like one of those small puzzles in which one must slide the squares around to form an image, teaching a multilevel class requires similar tinkering and patience. How one looks at the puzzle will shape how one goes about solving it. If we focus on one small corner of the puzzle, e.g. addressing differences in reading ability, we may find some very useful strategies for teaching, but other aspects of the puzzle may remain unsolved. If, on the other hand, we keep the whole image in mind as we try to solve the puzzle—for instance, by finding ways to keep the group unified as a whole—we may sacrifice academic goals for social ones.

The following exploration shares with you one sequence of tinkering I did with my two classes. I share it in the hope that my process may be of use to others who are also puzzling over their own multilevel classes.

The questions I started with address both views of the puzzle. 1) How can literacy activities be more inclusive of the lower-level readers and writers? and 2) How can I (the teacher) be less central in group learning activities? The first question addresses the micro view of the multilevel challenge, while the latter aims to focus on the group as a whole.

As most of us know, adult education requires a great deal of flexibility, often imposed by funding changes, attendance irregularity, etc. This investigation was no exception. I had originally planned to explore the use of non-print materials in class (photos, drawings, music) as a means to draw lower-level readers into literacy activities. Yet, pressing circumstances arose that necessitated that I change course.

The classes had been funded by a DOE grant since February 1995. In 1996, the US. government determined that workplace literacy grants would not be refunded. Therefore, as of June 30, 1997, the classes will have ended permanently unless alternative monies have been found.

Beginning in January 1997, the WEP staff began to develop strategies to fund the English classes at our five sites after June. We began to explore if monies for "basic skills" classes could be negotiated into workers' union contracts, and if such "contract language" could become standardized (the same language could be used in different contracts). We included union representatives in these discussions. This is a strategy that will take long-term planning, campaigning, and organizing to implement.

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In terms of more immediate possibilities, our director began researching other grants. In addition, the teachers and WEP director developed a proposal asking each of our five hospital sites to continue funding the classes after June. Each proposal emphasizes the success of the program and the benefit of the classes to their institution. We decided to present the proposals at each of our monthly Planning and Evaluation Team (PET) meetings. (A PET meeting consists of a representative from hospital Human Resources, the union, workers' supervisor(s), the WEP director, at least one student and a teacher). The Columbia/Metrowest PET would meet within a few weeks.

I wanted to include students' voices in this strategizing as much as possible. I felt a sense of urgency and responsibility that students be able to define their education needs and critically explore the issues surrounding the funding of classes. The investigation of multilevel classes that follows was thus molded by the circumstances of these events, as I incorporated the pressing funding issue into the content of my classes.

Developing Inclusive Literacy Activities

As a starting point, I chose an article called "Persistence Pays Off: Enrique helps draft a law in California to protect low-literacy workers," co-written by Leslie Shelton and Enrique Ramirez, an adult literacy student in South San Francisco. The article is from the September 1996 issue of *The Change Agent,* a newspaper of social justice issues in adult education published by the New England Literacy Resource Center. The article chronicles Enrique's participation on a legislative task force dealing with the legal needs of low-literacy workers.

In the article, Enrique confronts the task force (consisting of business and labor leaders, members of the media, legislators, and academics) on their exclusionary language within the meetings. The committee responds positively, listens to him, and asks Enrique to gather other workers' views on needed legal protection. Enrique collects testimonies from workers in over 100 literacy programs in San Francisco, one of which convinces the task force of the need to protect low-literacy workers from unwarranted termination, a concern of many workers. Enrique participates in drafting the law which was passed by the California legislature in 1991.

I felt the issues of exclusion due to language, race and class spoke directly to the barriers that the service workers often face at Metrowest, and would continue to face in the decisions being made about future classes. In addition, I felt that Enrique Ramirez was a valuable role model for students as we explored the risks involved in speaking out about literacy needs, both within and beyond the walls of our classroom.

Instead of chronicling each lesson, I will summarize some of the activities that were successful in the multilevel context, and some that presented problems, speculating how all activities might be further improved and drawing out implications for teaching multilevel groups in general. "Success" here is measured in the engagement of students (some or all) in an activity, and the value that they themselves ascribe to the activity.

We began with some pre-reading activities. First, we discussed the vocabulary of the title, "Persistence Pays Off." We learned the vocabulary, and talked about if we agreed or disagreed with this statement. Second, we looked at and discussed the picture of Enrique reading to his son at the library literacy program. This provided an opportunity to draw out more vocabulary and make predictions about Enrique's character, job, etc. Third, we generated questions for Enrique and hypothesized answers to these questions.

In general I found the pre-reading activities to be successful at including all learners across literacy levels; they especially enabled the two lower-level readers to show their strengths as strong speakers. One of these students is a native Jamaican who, as he is fluent in spoken English, was able to explain the concept of "persistence" to other students. He was thus not confined to the position of always being the "lower-level" student in the class. The oral nature of the activity made it possible for all learners to contribute their opinions and hypotheses about Enrique's character and to relate their own experiences.

Reading activities were not as successful at providing a means for all learners to show their strengths. For reading, I split the article into two parts, and divided each part into one and two-paragraph pages. In total there were nine such pages to the whole piece.

The procedure for reading typically entailed students reading a page of text aloud, pausing to ask questions about vocabulary which I would answer, and then another student rereading the text again out loud. I had written some vocabulary words in the margins to aid students and left blanks for students to add new words of their own. Following each page of text were questions to help students hypothesize about what would happen next, and to attempt to engage students with Enrique's character and story.

It is clear from the above description that such reading activities remained quite teacher-centered and relied upon the stronger readers. One of the lower-level readers remarked that he felt that he couldn't keep up with others as they read aloud. My response was to encourage him to listen during the first reading to get the main ideas, then to go back and read to understand as we read the second time. This did seem to help but did not fully address the issue that the text was too difficult for the lower-level readers to undertake independently.

It was at this point in the unit that I met with Lenore Balliro at the A.L.R.I./SABES Regional Support Center. She recommended that all students would benefit from a simplified summary of the piece. Perhaps I could even use less of the original text with the whole group, and switch to reading it for crucial points in the story line. This would enable readers to form a global understanding of the text, and make the challenge of reading a newspaper article less daunting, particularly for the lower-level readers.

Despite the challenges and teacher-centeredness of slowly reading through the complex text, I did notice a number of positive literacy behaviors being utilized by students. For example, students were rereading portions of the article between classes, and they were using vocabulary from the article in our class discussions and in their writing. This was true of the lowest-level reader and writer as well as the most advanced.

It was also a tremendous feat for students to be reading directly from a newspaper article and understanding it, particularly since about half of the students don't read the paper. I feel the frustration level remained manageable in part due to the small size of the class, where questions could easily be answered. I suspect that if we had continued in this way for too long, the level of frustration for some students might have overtaken the positive challenge.

To develop post-reading activities, I wrote sentences summarizing the main ideas of the first unit, blanking out key vocabulary words ("literacy program", "speak out," "task force," "legislature"). Students matched vocabulary words on slips of paper to the blanks. This worked well for all literacy levels. It allowed the lower-level students to practice word recognition and provided the higher-level readers with a context clue exercise.

The first unit of reading ended with Enrique feeling quite excluded by the task force and intimidated by the "big words" the committee members used. We made a list of "what Enrique could/should do" in this situation, discussing the difference in meanings between "could" and "should." I wrote students' ideas on the board and they copied the sentences into their notebooks. I created a follow-up worksheet that asked students to write advice to people in a variety of situations, including their own.

This activity also worked for all literacy levels. It enabled all students to participate in both reading and writing activities. On the other hand, like the reading activity, it continued to depend upon me to be the scribe and center. If I repeated this lesson, I might ask a stronger writer to scribe while I stay on the sidelines.

My meeting with Lenore helped me to set clearer goals for the next unit. As my Planning Evaluation Team meeting was scheduled to occur in two weeks, I needed to begin activities that helped students articulate their literacy needs and decide if/how this information should be presented at the meeting.

Before the next class, I created a simplified summary of the second half of the article and wrote four questions to focus student discussion on our class funding issues. Due to the time constraints, I used the summary as the reading text which allowed us to complete the story in half a class.

Getting Out of the Middle

The following two activities chronicle efforts I made to address the whole-view of the multilevel puzzle: developing strong inter-group dynamics that serve to unite students across differences in literacy ability. As mentioned above, I was particularly eager to explore ways that I could be less central in activities and encourage more interaction among students.

In our next class meeting, I put goals for the next two weeks on the board: 1) to prepare for the PET meeting; 2) to include everyone in discussion about future classes; 3) to get students talking more to each other than to me. We discussed the goals, which enabled me to make explicit my desire to be less central in class activities and to make room for all student voices. I pointed out how I often repeat what a student says, but more slowly for all to understand. I said that, despite the difficulty of understanding each others' accents, I saw the value of them addressing this challenge so that more conversation could occur both inside and outside of class. I asked the students to list what they "could do" if they didn't understand another student. Students said, "ask to repeat again," and "ask to say slow" or "say another word or sentence more easy." We agreed these would be guidelines for group discussions.

I then gave students the following four questions:

1) Why are classes at the hospital important?
2) How many times per week would be good? How many hours per class? Should classes meet on workers' time or hospital time?
3) What kind of classes are most needed?
4) Who should pay for the classes? (hospital/union/worker/someone else)? Why?

Each student got a chance to speak (following the guidelines). Frequently, stating a reason for classes led to an anecdote. For example, "They need bilingual people at the hospital," led to a story about how frequently Spanish-speaking workers are asked by doctors to translate for patients. "Because they need us to do this work," another student stated. "American people don't want to do [housekeeping, kitchen work]. It is too hard. So [because they hire non-native speakers] we need classes in order to do a good job." This led to discussion about why Americans didn't want to do housekeeping jobs, anecdotes about being hired when they knew very little English, and training co-workers who did not speak English. I kept the reasons on the board for the second class to read. After a similar discussion about goals and guidelines, students from the second class added their reasons to the list.

I noted later in my journal that I had only encouraged students once to relate to each other more than to me. I also noted that I was still playing a central role in the activity. I was standing in front of them at the board, I scribed their responses, and asked clarifying questions to generate more information. I felt I needed to come up with a different strategy for getting myself out of the middle.

For the next class, I copied their responses onto newsprint. As a reading exercise, each person read two responses aloud. Students added more reasons to the list. One student talked about an American in the Housekeeping Department who was asked by the supervisor to take out the hazardous trash. The worker told the supervisor that she didn't have the right gloves. The supervisor got angry, but the worker still refused. The student said, 'People who don't speak English can not do that. They don't know [their rights] and they can't communicate with supervisors. That's why English is important."

Returning for a moment to literacy concerns, I noticed that reading as a group from newsprint was a valuable way to unify a group around reading, in part combining the goals of both sides of this investigation. Students were focused together on one text and could all contribute to the "making of meaning" rather than working from separate sheets of paper. The more advanced writers copied the entire list into their notebooks unsolicited. I asked lower-level writers to choose a reason of importance to them to copy into their notebooks.

At the beginning of the next class, I drew a picture of a bus on the board. I drew myself in the back seat and a student in the front seat. I then wrote the following goals on the board:

1) to have students be leaders/drivers;
2) to include everyone's voice;
3) to listen and talk to each other.

I explained that I would take the back seat. This meant they had to decide who would write down ideas, how to conduct the discussion, etc. I said I would keep quiet unless they asked for my help.

Students in the first class chose the strongest writer to be the scribe and proceeded to talk about the questions. I wrote in my journal, "I know it worked [to be out of the middle] because I could feel the tension in myself." I could feel that my own teaching behaviors were being forced to change, and that I had to control my impulses to interfere with their process. On the occasions that I did interject, I raised my hand like a student and waited for them to call on me. This provided a little comic relief and allowed me to stay in the "back seat." I needed to do this when one worker's strong feelings were preventing her from listening to another worker's opinion. I asked for permission to interject and encouraged her to list the pros and cons of each student's idea rather than need to have one answer. I then retreated to the sidelines.

It was quite interesting to note the differences in the two groups. Students in the second class appeared to be all talking at the same time, overlapping their responses. One student was simultaneously translating for a beginning-level Portuguese speaker. They at first wanted me to scribe, and as I resisted, they convinced one of the students to do it. Again, I held my tongue and impulse to referee. This group arrived at agreement much more easily. Where there was difference of opinion, they recorded all responses.

I reflected afterwards on the importance of making my intentions explicit. I noted that students often don't jump into leadership positions in a classroom unless it is clear that this is expected of them. A teacher's behavior also determines the extent to which a student assumes a leadership role. This made me reflect on the issue of inclusion, and how being invited to participate and lead had a significant impact on their doing so.

I typed up both classes' responses to the questions under three headings: "Why are English classes important?," "We want.../We need...," and "Who's responsible for the classes?" and read them with students. (See box for a sampling of student responses to these questions.) The first class therefore had an opportunity to read the second class' ideas and discuss the differences in their responses. I also sent a copy of these responses to my director at WEP, who decided to postpone the PET meeting until she and the new union rep could speak to the students and discuss a strategizing process around the funding issue.

Sample Student Responses to the Discussion Questions

1) Why are English classes at the hospital important?

- *The classes have helped me to improve my reading and writing a lot. This is very important to me.*
- *The hospital is a public place and everything is in English. It's important we understand and speak English.*
- *It's important for us and important for the hospital. When we speak and understand English we can be more helpful to patients, nurses, doctors, supervisors.*
- *It's important for the hospital because many American people don't want to do that job (housekeeping, kitchen, etc), because this is a hard job. Spanish people and people from other countries will do it. Without it [us] the hospital has a problem. We need the classes.*
- *The classes are important because I can know what the signs in the hospital mean, also the precautions on the liquids we use, which one to use, where to use it [to read labels, and instructions].*
- *English will help us to know our rights. We can read hospital and union policies. We can talk to supervisors if we think our work is unfair, we have too much work, etc.*

2) We want...We need...

- *We want classes to continue.*
- *We need two hour class. If they say no, we want 1 1/2 hours. (Added by the second class: one student wants 1 1/2 hour classes.)*
- *We want it to be 1/2 hospital time, 1/2 worker's time.*

3) Who's responsible for the classes? The hospital should... The union should... Workers should... Others?

- *The hospital should pay for the classes. If the hospital says no, 1/2 union, 1/2 hospital. (Added by second class.)*
- *Workers shouldn't pay. Our wages are small.*
- *The union should help us.*

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Summary

In response to my first question: "How can literacy activities be more inclusive of lower-level learners?," I feel I have gained some very useful insights. Most valuable to me was learning that my lower-level readers needed to have a simplified summary of the newspaper text. Although I had been drawing on learners' "schema" in pre-reading and reading activities, I was focusing mostly on their personal experience as it related to the text, not on facts within the text itself. Even when teaching central concepts from a text, I tended not to teach the "plot," under the belief that I should not give the story away to students. Perhaps because higher-level readers can draw more on inferencing and predicting skills, the need for this summary for lower levels seems critical.

CCL
HGO.
CCL
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VALLE

In my investigation, the absence of a summary in the first unit made the reading quite difficult for lower-level readers, relied on my staying central to the reading process to decipher the text, and emphasized the skills of the advanced students. In the second unit, the summary enabled the lower-level readers to understand the story quickly and without much effort.

In subsequent units, I have found that lower-level readers also benefit from having a taped version of a text that they can listen to both prior to and following reading. If the reading on the tape is slow enough, one student also enjoys reading with the tape. Perhaps an advanced student could record the tape, particularly if he or she speaks the same language as the beginner so that the familiar accent might even aid in comprehension.

On a constructive note, the amount of review, discussion and repetition we did in the first unit made a big difference in comprehension for all levels. It is important to remember to plan this time into a unit.

The group reading activity from newsprint was inclusive of all levels, and kept students unified as a group rather than focused on individual copies. The level of interaction in the reading activity increased dramatically, including translation, discussion, and listening to each other.

Finally, in terms of literacy activities, this investigation taught me the value of having interactive follow-up activities, involving word recognition, sequencing, and writing for all levels. This includes opportunities to copy as well as generate sentences, and making sure that enough time is allotted to writing. Half an hour seemed to be the minimum needed to get students in my class started, especially reticent writers.

In terms of group dynamics, getting out of the middle was my primary goal and I was more successful at it in the second activity. I believe what made it possible was making this goal explicit to students and then stepping out of the way and staying there so that it could happen. In the future, I will continue to explore ways to let students decide on the structure of activities and encourage more leadership and interaction within the class.

At Metrowest, there are significant factors that unite students in the classes despite differences in literacy ability, such as shared work responsibilities and stresses, problems with supervisors, language barriers, and union issues, to name a few. Similarly, the subject of my activity—that is, the need for English classes at the hospital—is a need shared equally by all class members and created a great deal of solidarity within the group. Although this may be unique to an on-site workplace literacy class, looking for unifying themes may be a useful strategy for working with other multilevel classes. Finding ways that all learners can show their strengths and experience also serves to equalize the levels, as was evident within this group.

In one of those small picture puzzles I referred to earlier, there is always one square missing which allows you to manipulate the image. Similarly, it is a given that the "multilevel" picture is never fully complete but rather is constantly changing. •

Giving Advice Using "Could" and "Should"

The purpose of this lesson is to engage all learners in discussion and critical thinking activity and to provide a literacy activity accessible to all learners. The following activity reflects issues raised in my own class, so I recommend choosing situations that are relevant to your students' lives and/or readings. The lesson works well for a mixed-level class because it involves a lot of student interaction, can be fun and entertaining, and encourages learners to analyze situations more deeply. Here's how it goes:

1. Introduce the idea that students will be giving advice in this activity. Ask students to give specific examples of when they ask for and give advice.

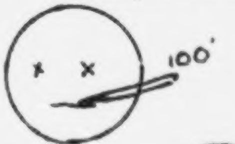
2. On 3 x 5 cards, write situations such as the following:

- I have a fever, and don't feel well. I'm afraid to call in sick. What could/should I do?
- I am Enrique. I feel nervous because I have to speak to the legislators today. What could/should I do?
- There's no money in our union money for classes. What could/should we do?

3. Each person picks a card and role-plays asking for advice. It may help if you do the first one to model it. Students respond using "could" and "should." In doing so, explain the difference in meaning between "could" and "should."

4. After each person in the group has had the opportunity to role play, follow up the activity with a worksheet such as the one below. Students will write down the responses they gave and received. Depending on the students' writing ability, lower-level writers may only complete the situation they role played, and more advanced writers may complete more or all of them.

Sample worksheet:

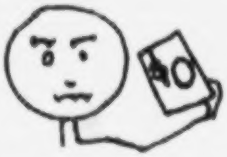


1."I don't feel well. I think I have a fever. I'm afraid to call in sick."

____

2. Enrique felt nervous about speaking to the legislators.

____

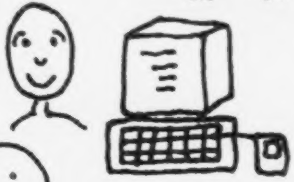


3. There is no money in our union contract for English classes.

____

4. Lali feels very tired after work.

____



5. Nil wants to learn to use a computer.

____

—*Emily Singer*

Ask Ms. Multi

Part 1

Since Miss Manners was not available to answer questions about how to behave appropriately in a multilevel class, her cousin, Ms. Multi, agreed to answer teachers' questions. Ms. Multi has the same ironic tone as her better-known cousin, but she assured us that her responses are of the most serious nature.

—

Dear Ms. Multi:
How do you help students at ALL levels in a multilevel class build their vocabulary? Even students who do a fair amount of reading in English outside of class have a difficult time retaining and reusing new words.
Word Wealth

Dear Word Wealth:
Ms. Multi always has to remind herself about active and passive vocabulary. As she understands it, passive vocabulary means you recognize a word and can figure it out when you see it in print, but you don't have the confidence or ability to use the word easily in conversation or writing. Active vocabulary means you can use the word easily. We acquire vocabulary at different stages and paces; words move from the vague to the clear depending on how often we see or hear them. That's why Ms. Multi has always been somewhat suspect of the "define a new word and use it in a sentence approach," because it seems sort of contrived and without context. Ms. Multi also suspects there is a functional element to the pace of vocabulary development: As students need the new words they will call them forth and make use of them. In short, maybe you needn't expect students to actively use even the majority of the new words they are acquiring. (Steven Krashen's *The Natural Approach* probably gives some good advice in this area.) Ms. Multi is confident you are providing context rich opportunities for students to acquire new language, rather than lists of words that do not relate to a larger meaning. If new words grow out of a topic you are studying over a period of time, there is more chance students will remember them.

—

Dear Ms. Multi:
I have a small class of mixed abilities. The situation is complicated by the fact that the not-as-literate student is also the only woman in the class (besides myself). Last class we were working collaboratively to edit a letter we are going to send, and I watched as the men essentially and perhaps not even intentionally shut out the woman from the editing process. Basically they wrote their ideas down on a piece of paper which the woman could not see very well, let alone read. She got more and more frustrated, asking, "Where are you in the letter? What paragraph are you changing?" and so on. When I tried to intervene and suggest we edit in a more public (and large print) way on the board, everyone protested that things were just fine. How do I make sure that collaborative projects like this one can effectively include all? *Worried*

Dear Worried:
In a case like this, Ms. Multi would most likely have done exactly what you did: intervene as the class facilitator. Perhaps she would have been a bit more emphatic and directive by wresting the paper from the students' hands and insisting that we use newsprint and markers so everyone would have an equal chance to see what was going on.... But Ms. Multi wasn't there, and it's so much more fun (and easier) to imagine the scenario than to live through it!!! Anyway...

Ms. Multi also shares your concern that gender issues are at play, though maybe not consciously. Has this dynamic displayed itself in other class sessions? If so, perhaps you might try some problem-posing activities to address the issue of inclusiveness, assertiveness, and so on. Ms. Multi knows, from our precious contact, that you are well familiar with the techniques that originated with the late Paolo Freire and were made popular by educators like Nina Wallerstein, Elsa Auerbach, and others. Perhaps you could develop a "code" (a cartoon or drawing or other representation that acts as a catalyst for discussion) that shows a group activity (at work, maybe) where someone is being squeezed out. Then you could do the drill with questions like: What is the problem here? Whose problem is it? What can X say? What can X do? and so on. Maybe even follow up with a role play. One would hope that students might recognize some of their own behavior in the class and become more sensitized to ways of dealing with it. The men, for example, need to see the value in allowing participation by the woman, who is not as experienced with literacy but might have good ideas to contribute, while the woman may see the value of rehearsing some assertiveness with the rest of the group so she can better get her needs met should the situation re-emerge, when you might not be there.

—

Dear Ms. Multi:
Is individual instruction better than whole group for a multilevel class? I choose individual instruction for my ABE class because it is easier to meet everyone's needs that way. I have read in previous columns that you do not approve of this method. Why? *One by One and Loving It*

Dear One by One:
Ms. Multi thinks there are times when individual instruction makes sense and she surely does not dismiss you for doing so. Ms. Multi gently leans toward the group approach because she believes that knowledge is socially constructed. However, she would rather not create rigid dichotomies between individual and group instruction, and often encourages teachers to deconstruct this polarity in an effort to arrive at more creative and complex solutions to instruction.

—

Dear Ms. Multi:
You always suggest grouping or pairing students as one way to deal with multilevel classes. You dispense this advice so glibly! Have you never had problems with students who resist group work? Some of my students like it, but others refuse to work with other students. This has caused underlying tensions in the class and it makes me furious and frustrated because I keep hearing that it's a good way to teach as I read about all the cooperative activities all the experts endorse. What's going on? *Wired*

Dear Wired:
You are absolutely right. We cannot assume that group work is easy. We cannot assume that it is appropriate all the time. It is loaded with possible conflicts. Ms. Multi suggests that you read the articles in this issue to examine conclusions some teachers have reached regarding group work. Though difficult, Ms. Multi does not suggest dismissing groups and pair work out of hand. The teacher needs to understand some basic things about the culture of students in the class—where animosity might linger because of the political history in their home countries; where gender issues (men and women working together) are highly sensitive or forbidden, and so on. In short, you gotta do some homework. Ms. Multi doesn't believe, however, that students cannot be challenged on some level; neither does she believe that it is impossible to negotiate new learning approaches with students who may be resistant because your approach is so different from the one used by teachers in their home country. Ms. Multi always thinks it best to be open with students about what and why you are doing something, and invite discussion about these issues in the classroom.

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Learning to Cooperate/ Cooperating to Learn

Marta Mangan-Lev

Fourteen learners sit around the outside of a "U" formed by three long tables. There was a buzz of conversation in more than one language, none of them English, when I walked into the room. Now the voices have stilled (it's early in the year) and fourteen pairs of eyes look expectantly toward the teacher (me). Showtime! The actor in me will rise to the occasion, happy to take the attention and deliver a show.

Many learners as well as teachers bring this assumption to the ESOL classroom—that instruction flows from teacher (keeper of knowledge) to learners (who desire and do not possess that knowledge). What I've learned about participatory education doesn't let me settle for this limited, one-way approach. As a teacher, the most useful and appropriate role for me is to set up conditions that support and encourage learners' active involvement in content directly drawn from their lives, then get out of the way of the learning that happens in authentic communication. I believe the balance of power in the classroom should rest with the learners, not the teacher. The focus of attention should be on the process of learning—the active use of language for meaningful communication—rather than the product—completing a worksheet or answering the teacher's questions "correctly." The shortcomings of a teacher-focused model are particularly obvious in working with the multilevel classes that characterize adult education programs. Delivering one lesson to a group of twenty or twelve or eight learners will necessarily leave some learners lost and others bored. If we hope to engage most of the learners most of the time, we must tailor instruction to respond to the specific learners.

I bring a belief in the values of a participatory approach to my work in a community based program in Chicopee, in western Massachusetts, where I teach Levels 1 and 2 ESOL. Our classes are multi-lingual, with from three to seven native languages spoken by learners in one class. Like all classes, they are multilevel. Our learners have a wide variety of economic situations (retired, working, unemployed, receiving assistance); religions; ages; class and formal education backgrounds; cultures; and goals they wish to pursue. They struggle to accommodate the dominant US culture, one which may or may not be comfortable or familiar.

Teaching requires creative responses to the complex variables presented by a group of learners. Like many ESOL teachers, one strategy I use in response to the multiple levels in my classroom is small group work. "Count off by 3's. Number ones sit with Natalya, number 2's with Teresa...." In small groups learners have increased time to actively engage with the language and interact with others. Last year, I participated in a semester-long cooperative project for a course at UMass, Amherst. As a learner myself, I worked cooperatively with a small group to plan a unit for one of my classes. In this unit, a group of Level 2 learners in our health program worked in the same small groups for several weeks to complete projects. The results were exciting! Over time, they forged friendships across many differences and produced a number of powerful projects. There were challenges: the absence of any group member delayed or set back a group's work; some learners preferred to work independently and others tended to want to "just do it" for the group. But by the end of the year, there was a warm and exciting classroom climate of mutual sharing of resources, ideas and skills. Learners' language skills, by their own and by my estimation, had significantly improved through authentic interactions to accomplish shared goals.

My own experiences as a learner in this project not only sharpened my awareness of what exactly I was asking of my students when they worked in groups, but raised many questions. What exactly makes group work cooperative? How do these factors interact to support or inhibit effective group work? How does such cooperation serve the needs of a multilevel group? This year, as a participant in A.L.R.I.'s teacher research project, I wanted to explore these questions and refine my use of small cooperative groups. I had high expectations! In addition to answering the above questions, I hoped that learners would work in the same groups over time; that they would identify and choose to work with content meaningful to them. I wanted to support learners to reflect upon and evaluate their experiences, and I wanted to work with very new speakers of English—Levels 1 and 2.

Defining Cooperative Learning

The literature and I concur—all cooperative learning is group work, but not all group work is cooperative. Here are some vignettes to illustrate what makes group work cooperative learning: 1) Three learners are working together to complete a medical information form. Until each supplies the information only he or she has, they cannot complete their task. *The information each participant has is necessary to complete the task.* 2) A group of learners is sharing their writing and giving feedback to each other. One person's role is to retell the story they've just heard. Another person's role is to tell something she likes about the writing. The third person is the questioner; her job is to ask questions about the piece. *Each learner has a clear role essential to the task's completion.* 3) Learners have completed a task in their groups. Each then individually responds to a questionnaire: Did you speak a lot in your group? What did you do if you didn't agree with other people? How did your group decide to solve the problem? *Learners reflect upon and explicitly learn cooperative skills such as problem solving, managing differences and turn-taking.*

Cooperative learning requires a classroom atmosphere of trust and respect, one in which learners have gotten to know each other and enjoy learning together. For learners whose only experiences with formal education have been in "traditional" teacher-centered classrooms, or settings in which learners compete with each other, classroom norms of active sharing and interdependence may be unfamiliar. An important first step in facilitating cooperative learning is to provide on-going and ample opportunities for learners to interact, learn about each other and become a community. In my Level 1 class, we started the year by making silhouettes of each learner. Under their silhouettes, learners wrote about themselves in large letters. Throughout the year, we referred to these "profiles" to remind ourselves of what we knew about each other. When a new learner joined the class, learners reminded me that we needed to make her silhouette to put up with the others.

To continue to build our learning community, we start each class with a paired conversation activity. Each learner is given a card with either a picture or a word/phrase (an article of clothing, a face expressing an emotion, a drawing of a scene with variations, etc., depending on the content the teacher wants to practice). They must then find, by asking questions of their classmates, the person who has the matching card. To accommodate a variety of learner skills, learners may be given only a cue for the appropriate question, or the question written out to be repeated. Once partners have been matched, each person then responds to a question suggested by the teacher. Questions range from concrete (Who is in your family? or Tell me about your weekend.) to the abstract (TV is good for children. Do you agree or disagree? Why?). There is a wealth of activities which foster such interaction (e.g., see Bassano and Christison, *Community Spirit*) and at the same time provide motivating and engaging language activities. Such activities become a familiar part of class routines and establish the central

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role of learner-learner interaction in the classroom. Learners find this interactive environment interesting and engaging. In addition to establishing trust among learners, I like to make learner feedback a habit as well. When I wanted learners to specifically reflect and give me feedback on group work, I developed an easy-to-fill-out-questionnaire (see box).

Groupwork Questionnaire

How did your group work together tonight??

Name:________________ Date:________

What did your group do today?

____

Circle one:

I feel good/not good about my group today.

I talked a lot/a little in my group.

Other people talked a lot/a little in my group.

My group helped me learn a lot/a little today.

My group got a lot/a little work done today.

In working cooperatively in small groups, learners will use this environment as support in developing cooperative skills. In the course of my teacher research project, I planned and reflected upon many group activities. I found a number of factors influenced a group's success, some brought by learners to the classroom, others contributed by teachers.

Looking at Learners to Compose Groups

Our learners present us with a number of variables—skills, consistency of attendance, native language, learning style, personality and willingness to "try in English." In one of my classes, Nina, a very new speaker of English, has less vocabulary and grammar than many others in the class. However, she is willing to struggle to express herself with occasional recourse to native language. She rarely misses a class. In groups, she is often quiet, but always attentive to the task at hand. Anna, with much more language and skill, also attends regularly. She's less comfortable with group work, however, and unless the structure of the task requires her to engage with other group members, she prefers to complete the task on her own, often with simultaneous translation. Marie, a very skilled language learner, attends less regularly. She enjoys group work and tends to be at least as focused on the level of interaction in her group as on successful completion of the task. She draws out quiet members to assure their participation.

Such learner characteristics as those Nina, Anna and Marie bring to the classroom are familiar to any teacher of a multilevel class. How effectively the teacher groups learners, with their various preferences and styles, will determine the quality of the groups' interaction. There are times when I may form groups randomly, or try to group learners that are similar on a particular dimension, or try to create heterogeneous groupings. However, I found that the most highly communicative groups are those that include a member who, like Marie, attends to the participation of each; one like Nina who will struggle to stay in English; and one like Anna who will help the group move to complete its task.

I had hoped to establish groups that would work together over an extended period of time, giving learners the opportunity to become familiar co-learners, to build cooperative skills with the same small group. In fact, only two of the four groups in my class met consistently and worked together well, as reported in their evaluations and also as seen through my observation. The other two groups never quite clicked, due to learner attendance, a mismatch among group members, or inadequate support from the tasks I presented them. Next year, I plan to introduce groupwork with more explanation, more information for learners about why we work in groups and how they might benefit from this way of learning together. Since my class is one with very basic language skills, such background explanation should be offered in the context of experiences with cooperation, experiences which would clarify and illustrate more abstract explanation.

Learner Variables in Cooperative Work

- Willingness to focus on group interaction as more important than task completion
- Regularity of attendance
- Preference for working independently or with others
- Willingness to attempt speaking English in group work
- Level of language skill
- Native language—whether it's shared with others, what degree of dependence upon translation

Putting the Parts Together

When I set out to plan and teach my classes, there are a number of variables that I consider and manipulate. What will be the content of classes and how will it be chosen? How will I accommodate/integrate learner styles and preferences? What methods will I use to structure class time? How will I give learners directions? How will the room be set up? What tone will I set for our interactions?

As in any teaching, the content must be meaningful and engaging for learners and preferably of their choosing. How that content is structured into activities will determine how well they work—the most appropriate and interesting topic can be suffocated in a teacher-centered lecture or drill. The most effective activities I facilitated incorporated the key principles of cooperative learning.

> *Principles of Cooperative Learning*
>
> • Each participant in a group has information necessary to complete the task.
> • Each learner has a clear and essential role.
> • Learners reflect upon and explicitly learn cooperative skills, such as problem solving, managing differences and turn-taking.

This aspect of planning is like putting together a jigsaw puzzle. The content, the learning needs and styles of a group of unique individuals, and the language skills to be used will all hopefully fit together within the structure of a specific task. There were times it did and times it didn't. One successful activity was one in which learners shared their writing. After a series of activities that culminated in each learner writing a story, groups met to read and respond to each other's writing. There were four (or five, if there were five group members) roles which rotated among the participants. One person was the story reader, another retold the story they had just heard, a third asked one or two questions about the story, and the fourth group member told something they liked about the story. All of the roles drew upon skills that had been practiced in the activities preceding the group work. All were challenging, but within reach of most of the learners. Their contribution to the activity required that they listen to each other, unlike other kinds of activities in which learners may be so focussed on preparing their own contribution that they don't heed what others are saying.

Activities didn't work well if I left out one of the principles; for example, when there weren't essential roles for each learner and it was possible for Anna to just forge ahead and do it herself, she did. It was a group task in name only and not in function. Her behavior was instant feedback to me on whether I had designed the activity well. I also found it important to avoid forcing activities into a cooperative mold that were more appropriate for another instructional strategy—work in pairs or individually. When I overplanned in this way, I lost touch with my sensitivity to the group, that teacher radar that helps us shift activities, make choices about how to proceed or about what activities would be effective at a given moment.

Another key element of facilitating groupwork is giving clear directions, ones which draw upon knowledge and skills learners possess, for the task the group will undertake. One notable flop of an activity for me involved coming to consensus about what health topics to cover in class, first in pairs, then in groups of four, then eight, then the entire class. The learners were not familiar with the concept of consensus, and my directions were inadequate. I should have prepared a mini-lesson on consensus—what it is, how to use it—before expecting them to implement the process in an activity. It is better to err on the side of giving directions that may be too detailed for some, if it means that more learners are clear about the activity. I had hoped that, as learners became more adept at working cooperatively, they would need less specific directions and could "own" a task or project, shaping it to their own needs. We didn't get to that point, due in large part to what I needed to learn and practice about structuring groups. I look forward to moving ahead with that goal in future classes.

Finally, another factor to consider when implementing cooperative groups is logistics. Logistical factors include the size of the room and the shape and number of tables or desks. My classroom is far from ideal—it's small and equipped with three long rectangular tables, usually arranged in a "U" with learners seated on the perimeter. There isn't room to pull the tables apart and create more individual spaces for groups; I encourage people to sit so that they can see and hear each other and initially am even more directive. From time to time we rearrange the room, looking for a set-up more conducive to group interaction. Essentially, we need a bigger space and smaller tables; in the meantime we work with what we have.

Teacher Controlled Variables in Facilitating Cooperative Groupwork

- Does the structure of the task require the input of all learners?
- Are the directions clear and understood by learners?
- Is the content of the class engaging and meaningful to learners?
- Are there clear roles for each learner?
- Do the strategies used to form groups effectively mesh learner characteristics?
- Do logistical factors (room size, kind and number of tables, noise levels) support success?

In reflecting on this year, my ambitious intent to elicit content from learners and to have the same groups work over time was not successful. I needed to structure activities in which the class could explore some topics, then make choices about which more specific ideas to investigate further. There were parts of the project that worked well—there was a warm and interactive atmosphere in the class; learners entered into groupwork with energy and enthusiasm; and, according to their self-evaluations, learners found group work enjoyable and a good way to learn. Every year and every group is different: I look forward to building on this year's successes and ongoing questions in the year to come! •

Annotated Bibliography

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Scane, J., Guy, Anne Marie and Wenstrom, Lauren (1994). *Think, Write, Share: Process Writing for Adult ESL and Basic Education Students.* San Diego: Dominie Press. Defines process writing and cooperative learning and outlines how the two are compatible. Includes specific suggestions for their use in the classroom.

"Find the Person Who..."

In our class, a favorite and fun activity which helps create an interactive, cooperative environment is "Find Someone Who..." (also known by other names— "Back and Forth Bingo" or "Treasure Hunt"). I draft a list of completions to this sentence, such as, "Find someone who...went to the grocery store this week," or "Find someone who...came to the US more than two years ago." These sentences vary according to the level of the class and the particular structures we're practicing, and can be simplified as necessary by giving the full question for learners to ask, rather than requiring them to formulate the question. Learners circulate, asking each other questions and writing the names of those who answer yes. It can result in music to a language teachers' ears—the hum of conversation. *—Marta Mangan*

Why Teach in Groups Instead of Individualized?

Janet Stein

Though I understand the rationale for teaching one-on-one, especially in a multilevel class, I have to admit that I'm just not very good at planning and presenting work that way. Just as students have different styles of learning, instructors have different styles of teaching. I've tried keeping folders for every student, doing lots of xeroxing and correcting, and trying to make the rounds of the room to give every student some attention, but I quickly get overwhelmed, lose track of who is doing what, and feel I have never given anyone the time they need. So, what to do? I have found more success in planning a lesson for the whole class knowing that different students have different strengths they bring to it and different skills they are likely to take away. I encourage students to work in groups whenever they want to, and we usually discuss work as a full class after people have had a chance to try it on their own. From where I stand in the classroom, I can see many advantages to my students in this type of instruction. Here are just a few:

1) The curriculum frameworks for math encourage students to work on problem-solving, communication, reasoning and estimation. Group work supports these standards, which make math both challenging and interesting to adult learners.

2) When students work in groups on the same problem, I can walk around and listen to their discussions. It gives me a better sense of what they understand, and how they understand, than their written work alone. Also, students who explain their reasoning to each other actually deepen their own understanding.

3) When students work in groups they spend much more time on math than they do if each has to wait for me to come around. If someone gets stuck, there is always help nearby. Sometimes students use their native language to explain to each other if they are really stuck. Often this understanding then gets translated back into English to fit the problem.

4) Having a group discussion about problems that we have all been working on allows students to see different ways to approach the questions and arrive at solutions. Hearing from peers is, I believe, more instructive than relying exclusively on a teacher's explanations. And offering a solution, or even part of one, helps students feel more confident about what they do know and less insecure about what they don't.

How Many Rectangles?

Students had a choice of using color tiles or graph paper, and worked in groups of two or three. I assigned each team a number (20, 24, 30, 36, or 48) giving the higher numbers to the speediest students. The assignment was to find all the rectangles possible with the given number of tiles, and to record the width, length, perimeter and area.

After the teams built or drew their rectangles, we made a chart of all the results, and looked for patterns in the relationships between area and perimeter for the rectangles.

From this, students had a chance to review the factors of these numbers, learn or review the formulas for area and perimeter, detect patterns in number and shape, learn or review the symbols < and >, look at similar and non-similar rectangles, and consider the proportions of various rectangles.

When the “Tried and True” Doesn’t Fit

Cara Streck

I really like math and have since I was a child. This affection for math, I believe, springs from the same root as my passion for detective stories. I like to untangle all the clues and solve a mystery/problem by following the rules of logic and my intuitive sense of what’s happening. I also have a passion for teaching. Again, I like to solve the mystery of what is getting in the way of learning and then suggest new images or methods that will help each student acquire the skills she needs.

Teaching students rather than subjects, I tend to use a number of methods in any one class period, trying to make sure that everybody “gets it.” For five years, I was a math consultant in Canada for a publisher of an elementary math program. That experience allowed me to learn from a great number of teachers throughout North America. It also forced me to become very familiar with the use of manipulatives in helping both teachers and students decode the logic behind the computation. I have also come to value greatly the ways students can teach each other and help each other learn, and, therefore, I encourage students to work in pairs or in small groups. In the autumn of 1996, however, I encountered a multilevel classroom situation where nothing I had done before seemed completely appropriate to the needs of the students.

The Students

The Adult Learning Program in which I teach is housed in a shelter for homeless families, Project Hope, located in an urban neighborhood on the border between Dorchester and Roxbury in Boston. All of our students are women.

The education program was begun seven years ago at the request of former shelter residents who, having obtained housing for their families, realized that in order to enjoy any measure of economic security they needed at least a GED. Most of the students currently in the program are on AFDC and consequently are being affected by the limits put on education and the demands for community service that were part of “welfare reform” legislation at both the state and federal levels. Many of the women have reported being pressured by social workers (who undoubtedly were being pressured by their supervisors who were under pressure from the state, who. . .) to quit school and get a job, even before the legislation was finalized. At Project Hope, we have tried to help them sort out fact from interpretation, but students still have felt under enormous pressure to finish their GED’s before being forced to quit. This in turn affected the questions I asked myself as I tried to figure out how best to help the women meet their educational goals, especially the one that involved passing the GED math test by the next summer.

On Monday and Wednesday mornings from October, 1996, to June, 1997, five students and I met for 90 minutes with the expressed purpose of their getting ready to take and pass the GED math test. I’d like to introduce them to you so that you will have some understanding of their many levels of math proficiency and maturity. (Students’ names have been changed to protect privacy.)

Four of the students had been in the Adult Learning Program for at least a year prior to the first meeting of this particular class. Of these four women, three (Janine, Donna, Neruda) showed evidence of having made progress toward the mastery of computation with whole numbers, fractions and decimals, as well as some understanding of basic geometry and measurement. Each was determined to pass the test by July, 1997. During the previous year, we had struggled together to find ways through the math anxiety they had encountered at various stages, and at this point they generally felt competent with basic math and relied upon each other for help when they felt blocked. They had come to recognize that each had areas of strength and areas of weakness, but that together they could usually solve the problems they encountered.

The fourth woman, Sunny, already had been struggling with math for two years. She had spent one year in a group of eight women with whom I had used a project-centered approach to math, focusing first on measurement and whole number computation, then moving on to informal geometry and decimals. One of the main purposes of these classes was to give students an opportunity to "play" with numbers in settings that seemed real to them. (For example, we simulated redecorating the classroom and measured, computed areas, estimated amounts of paint needed, and shopped for the best bargains in paint and carpeting.) Sunny participated shyly, but seemed unable to transfer what she was able to do in a group activity to solving problems in a math book. The second year, she spent her math time working on computation with one other student and a different teacher. While observing her during independent study periods, I noticed that she was able to do basic computations, as long as the problems were all of the same type. She was not able to transfer computation skills to word problems, even when she had repeatedly practiced the computation skill required. It seemed obvious to me that Sunny needed a different kind of instruction, so I asked to take her into my class.

> ***...Students were willing to help one another learn, but some were clearly able to move on before others were ready and were beginning to fear that the slower pace of the group would lead somehow to their being penalized by the welfare system....***

The fifth student, Maria, was new to the Adult Learning Program that September. Her placement test results indicated that she had mastered basic computation and had some knowledge of algebra, but she needed practice decoding word problems and applying what she knew.

In February, we were joined by Nyrissa, who had entered the program in January. Her placement test indicated that she belonged with another math group where basic skills were being emphasized. Yet her sister, who had acknowledged suffering from a great deal of math anxiety, was already in that group, and experience with the two siblings in other classes indicated that putting them together for math would not help either. So Nyrissa also joined the class.

The Question Evolves

How could I best help this disparate group meet their goals in math? In October, we spent class periods working as a group on problems from many sources. We especially enjoyed some of those included in the Massachusetts Portfolio Assessment Project's task bank. This approach gave students an opportunity to "play" with math, reinforcing their appreciation of what each already had learned and reminding them that they could enjoy solving problems. These classes also gave me an opportunity to get a feel for the needs and strengths of each member of the group. Working together also reinforced the notion that they could rely on one another for help and support. Students enjoyed these classes, but a spate of publicity about the "welfare reform" increased their anxiety, and some began asking for "real" math classes, meaning ones where I taught and they used books. Sunny was ready to accept my recommendation that she stay in the class and work with manipulatives at her own pace for as long as she needed.

Because of the need of the majority in the class to practice applying basic computational skills to a wide variety of situations, I introduced them to Myrna Manly's work-text *The GED Math Problem Solver*, from Contemporary. Each student had her own book and they started together on Chapter One, using a combination of large group instruction, peer teaching, and independent work.

By the end of November, it had become very clear that Janine and Maria were able to work through material in the book much faster than others and felt frustrated at the group's pace. Again the anxiety driving this frustration seemed to come from media reports of the punitive measures soon to be taken against those on welfare. Students were willing to help one another learn, but some were clearly able to move on before others were ready and were beginning to fear that the slower pace of the group would lead somehow to their being penalized by the welfare system.

This put me in a dilemma. I like to teach and know I'm regarded by students as a good teacher, but I felt that in order to meet these particular student needs I would have to change my teaching style radically. I truly believe that students learn best when they know themselves to be part of a community of learners. Yet the needs of students in this particular group were diverging to such an extent that in my mind they threatened any sense of group identity. I also am strongly committed to listening to what students say they want and need, but, in this situation, I felt that what they wanted was driven by anxiety fueled by a social movement that denied the value of education to those on AFDC. It was at this point that I was invited to become part of the group committed to looking for ways to function in a multilevel classroom. The timing couldn't have been better.

Was this somehow supporting the mentality that told the women that it was completely their fault that they were on AFDC and, therefore, it was up to each one to pull herself out?

I framed the question I wanted to study as follows: **"When is it appropriate for a more advanced student to work with a less advanced student and when is it not helpful?"** Some of my students were clearly telling me that working within the group was not helping them meet their goals. I was already individualizing instruction for Sunny. Was it time to find a way to do so for the others? After a group discussion about where we needed to go, we agreed that each woman would work on the material that she felt she needed and that each would work on the material required to pass the GED at her own speed. The book would provide the framework and I asked that each woman commit to following the text sequence and discussing her work with me at the end of each chapter. I gave each woman control over her own learning process and firmly committed myself to the role of resource person and facilitator.

Student Response

Janine and Maria took off! For the first couple of classes in the new format, Janine looked for a lot of reassurance, acting as though she really couldn't believe that she was actually understanding what she read and solving word problems. Both she and Maria were very willing to ask either me or another student for help when they hit snags; moreover, both were now quite willing to give help when asked, while they had previously begun to show annoyance.

Donna, who was in the process of being tested at Massachusetts General Hospital for dyslexia, seemed wary about working more on her own, yet she also expressed relief that she did not have to keep up with anyone else and could move at her own pace. Neruda, whose reading vocabulary (as opposed to her spoken vocabulary) was probably at a third grade level, was glad to be able to take her time with problems. Naturally gregarious, she, more than the others, expressed a concern at not being part of a group for instruction.

Sunny was spending the class periods finding patterns and relationships while "playing" with Cuisenaire rods. She was beginning to show an intuitive sense of what it meant to say that one number was bigger than another and of the meaning of addition and subtraction. She worked at a table by herself, and she seemed happy and relieved to finally be able to move at her pace.

Consulting the Experts

While the students seemed happy with the new order, I was uneasy. I felt uncomfortable with the individualistic atmosphere we were creating. Was this the best situation for these students, all of whom had already experienced some marginalization? Was this somehow supporting the mentality that told the women that it was completely their fault that they were on AFDC and, therefore, it was up to each one to pull herself out? Hoping to get some insight I posted my question to a list of math teachers on the Internet:

> I'm working on a research project looking at strategies that work in a multilevel classroom. I find myself questioning the value of having students who already "get " a concept take time out to teach someone who doesn't. Is the value gained by either student enough to override the need of the first student to pass the GED test as soon as possible? In working with adults, most of whom have been out of school for some time, and most of whom did not seem to have gotten math instruction adequate to their needs in previous educational settings, is it fair to expect that even when they are able to work with a concept adequately themselves that they will have the skills to help another student undo the inadequate conceptual frameworks she has held for many years? Tis a puzzlement!

The responses were few and disappointing. It may have been the fault of the way I expressed my question or a result of using a faceless medium, but I felt that colleagues in adult education lectured me on the value of group work and peer teaching. They seemed not to understand that these would have been my natural choices of teaching methodology, except that these students seemed to require something else. Was I the only one who felt the students' fears of being without financial support for themselves and their families unless they quickly passed their GED math test? Here's one example of the responses I received:

> What do you mean by "get" a concept? After semesters of teaching arithmetic to adults, and more semesters reading mathematics education research (and earned advanced degrees in mathematics), I am still deepening my understanding of what most people would consider to be very elementary mathematics concepts, including arithmetic of fractions, and the teaching and learning of those concepts. . . . There is much more to teaching mathematics than understanding the content.

While other responses felt less patronizing, none really addressed the issue in the framework of a question of justice, as it had positioned itself for me. It was at this point that the support of Martha Merson at the A.L.R.I. became critical. She too found the replies disappointing and helped me move past the paralysis that gripped me by suggesting that if other teachers couldn't help me maybe my students could.

With her help, I developed a set of five questions, which I posed to the students. I gave it to them during our math period and asked that they write answers so that I would not influence their responses by a word or gesture. (See box below for their unedited responses; Neruda and Nyrissa were absent):

After reading their responses, I summarized what I thought they were telling me and checked my understanding with the women. They all agreed with the following summary: *The students told me that they*

Thinking About Math Class

1) What are the advantages you find in doing math this way?
- *The advantage of working like this is good because you get to get your brain working and learning for yourself. (Maria)*
- *The advantage that I have for doing math this way is I can work better if I have someone in the room with me in case I feel I'm gonna mess up. (Janine)*
- *I think it's a Great Advantage for me because I couldn't do a lot of the math before but now I see a whole new difference in my learning and it's very helpful to me because I don't feel as pressured and that nervous. (Sunny)*
- *What I like is you work on your own time and you don't have to keep up. (Donna)*

2) What are the disadvantages for you?
- *None. I like doing this way. (Maria)*
- *The disadvantage of math is if I feel I can't do it I want to give up. (Janine)*
- *My dislike - that we don't have board time. (Donna)*

3) Do you miss working in a group?
- *Sometime working in a group is good but sometime bad because we all learn at the same time. I like working alone. (Maria)*
- *Sometimes I miss working in a group because its fun all together. (Janine)*
- *I like working in a small group and one on one. I think it opens new doors for me. (Sunny)*
- *I miss work in a group because you learn from other students and you learn different way. (Donna)*

4) Do you find your that own progress is helped or hindered when you work out math problems in a group?
- *Yes, because I like to teach and if anyone needs help and I know how to do the problem then why not help them. It makes me feel good. (Maria)*
- *I like it when someone asks me for help because it makes me feel like I'm doing my work right. (Janine)*
- *It helps me because I learn something new that I didn't know before every bit helps. (Sunny)*
- *It help me know that what I learned I can remember how to work it. (Donna)*

5) Do you prefer working on your own or with a partner or partners?
- *I like working on own. But I also like working with small groups. (Maria)*
- *Yes, it would be good if we works in 2's. I think it would be easier for all. (Janine)*
- *I think I wouldn't like to work by myself in a room. I find it distractful. I need for me a lot of encouragement and hearing that I'm doing well. (Sunny)*
- *I like working on my own because I can work at my own time. (Donna)*

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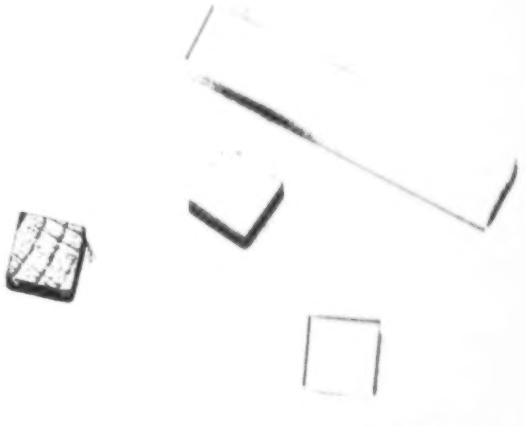
liked working on their own because they could move at their own pace. They also indicated that they missed the group work. All said they liked being asked to help someone else because it helped them learn more themselves. This statement then became my guide in structuring the class.

"Both/And"

Years ago a wise friend told me that a "both/and" solution was almost always preferable to "either/or." Again he was proven right. The students wanted it all: the flexibility of working at their own pace; the stimulation of group work; the confirmation of peer tutoring. And I'd do all I could to see they got it. My question had changed and become: How do I structure a class so that students will gain the benefit of working with others without the frustration of feeling held back in their own process?

Together we developed a rhythm with which both they and I feel comfortable. We open with a group activity. Sometimes it's multiplication bingo, at others an article from the morning paper that involves math, such as a story about the pros and cons of using check cashing stores. If I've seen a number of students struggling with the same concept in a previous session, I may present a short review of the principal concepts involved and get them to make up problems for each other. We spent the introductory period of six classes, for example, developing the idea of patterns from pattern blocks through number series. This was our time to play with mathematical ideas together.

Students then spent an hour working in the text at their own pace. Sometimes I spent time with a particular student who needed help with a certain concept. Donna especially liked to work problems on the board when she was having difficulty, so we did that together. Sunny by this time was becoming more and more self-sufficient and by February had moved from her work with the manipulatives into the book. She needed support and encouragement from me to use drawings or manipulatives to visualize a problem, but was able to work for long periods on her own. Neruda needed to be encouraged to believe in her ability. She had to be weaned from an over-dependence on someone else to tell her she was right. Janine and Maria became more and more self-confident. Each took more and more control of her own learning as was evidenced by their requests for supplementary materials to help them when they felt stuck or by their allotment of class time to both practice tests and new material.



Nyrissa now became the most challenging member of the group. She sat by herself at a table and had to be coaxed to join the others for the introductory game or class. She tended to simply flip pages in the text, trying a problem here and there when something looked familiar, then sighing dramatically when she found she had the wrong answer. When I suggested that she'd have more success if she worked through a chapter from start to finish, she got very agitated and told me over and over again how much she hated math. Finally, after being allowed to express her opinion for a few weeks, she let me help her with the concept of perimeter. She grasped it quickly and was thrilled when she began to understand what the problems were asking for. Gradually, she began to tell me when she had a problem and to ask for help. We were also able to get her a tutor so she now is feeling more confident in her own ability.

What I've Learned

Throughout this period, as a teacher I felt stimulated and challenged because in the course of a period I might have to teach a number of different concepts to various learners. I enjoyed it so much that I found myself questioning whether I was working hard enough. Preparation meant reviewing notes from the previous class and trying to predict what would be needed by the various class members. I was constantly unraveling the mysteries of what a student already knew that could help her understand what she needed to learn.

Through this process I have learned to trust my students to help me understand what they need to succeed. This group was multilevel in many dimensions—previous learning experiences, concept mastery, self-confidence, reading/vocabulary skills. By many criteria, they should never have been constituted as a class; the differences were too great. Yet, with their guidance, we were able to create an environment in which each one's needs were met.

This happened despite the tremendous pressure from forces outside the classroom which greatly affected the environment within it. We were able to create a space for learning, not by denying the real impact of welfare reform but by acknowledging its reality and adapting accordingly. We were able to create a community of learners within which students had the freedom and support to move forward, each at her own pace, toward her goal of passing the GED math test.

Will I use this format in September? I have no idea! It will depend on the needs of the group I have at that time. The longer I teach the more I am convinced that each class is its own mystery. Each woman comes into the group with unique life experiences, some life-promoting and some life-denying. Students interact with each other based on the coping skills that have gotten them this far, even if they are inappropriate to this setting. Within all this diversity, my role is to help each find her own way to her goal and to invite them to share their gifts with one another. What a privilege for one who so loves mystery. •

Working With Patterns

Purposes: 1) Monday morning "wake-up"; 2) Help students use spatial intelligences; 3) Lead-in to discussion of number patterns.

Materials: Sets of pattern blocks or xeroxed sheets that include various sizes and shapes. (Available for loan at the A.L.R.I. library or for purchase from publishers of math materials and manipulatives.)

Method: 1. Ask students to take five blocks and create a pattern.

2. Discuss meaning of the word "pattern." (I find students often confuse "pattern" and "picture.")

3. Teacher uses five blocks to model a pattern with enough information that someone else could continue it. If one of the students in Step 1 has made such a pattern, use that instead.

4. Have students articulate or show what the next block would be. Have students describe the pattern in words.

5. Continue, building the complexity of the patterns.

6. Make sure each student understands both how to build and how to describe their own pattern with at least three different elements, and how to continue someone else's pattern.

Possible Pitfalls: Some students may be able to show you what to add but find it hard to tell you what to do next. Help them find words for their process. Praise their intuitive grasp but encourage them to become verbal and logical.

Extension: Put a simple number pattern on the board, such as five consecutive even numbers. Have students describe the pattern in words (give the rule for the pattern) and continue it. Gradually increase the complexity of the patterns.

Why does it work?: Students can start from very different levels of understanding and can choose how complex a pattern to make and how quickly to build complexity. Students learn from hearing others describe the pattern.

—Cara Streck

A Baker's Dozen: Reasons for Individualized Math Classes

Joan Bruzzese and Nellie Dedmon

1) Math classes are not filled according to ability.

2) Many of our students have not done any math in years.

3) A student who is able to do advanced math does not want to do subtraction of whole numbers.

4) A student who understands a concept does not want to wait until others in class "get it."

5) Students who do not have a comfort level with math feel "bad" that they don't get it when most others do.

6) Some students prefer to have lots of examples and then have time to practice with many of the same sort of problems until they get comfortable with them.

7) Students want to progress as quickly as possible. They say that they want to get the answers correct, not play games.

8) Many students from countries other than the U.S. have great computation skills, but the vocabulary and reading gets in the way on word or "wordy" problems. Working one-on-one with these students helps them to pull out what is necessary, resolving the confusion of words and math quickly.

9) Some students cannot even make monetary exchanges, and others have an inappropriate attitude regarding these students.

10) Students who can't keep up with the class get frustrated and drop out.

11) Students who can't keep up with the class sit at the back and never catch up.

12) Students need to know they aren't alone with the problem. By sitting alongside them, the teacher helps them feel less tense, more at ease. Students can confide some of the gaps in their knowledge. For example, by working one-to-one, Joan found out that a student couldn't tell time or understand concepts like "two weeks from tomorrow" or "the third Monday of the month." Students feel less comfortable admitting their gaps in a large group setting.

13) The students' progress and comfort in class is a priority.

What Does It Take?

Martha Merson

Much has been said and will continue to be said about managing a multilevel class. While this issue has presented its challenges to me as a teacher, I recently have been paying attention to my feelings as a learner in a class whose participants have multiple levels of experience. When I took a window repair workshop, I realized that I needed to use every learning strategy I had to make sense of the curriculum. As someone with 21 years of mainly positive school experiences, I think of myself as a pretty successful learner with a variety of strategies. But nothing could counteract the negative aftertaste this workshop left. My experiences led me to wonder more about strategies and how learners, myself included, decide which strategies to implement to get our needs met in a challenging situation and just when we decide to give up.

Here is what I wrote two months after the workshop:

> When the presenter begins again, he turns to the window and starts taking it apart. He instructs us to turn in our hand-out packet to the fourth page and we review the vocabulary. Then suddenly he is talking fast and furious and the parts are flying. He is going on about chains. Some windows have chains instead of sash cords. He asks who has those. No one does. Nevertheless, he shows us how to fix these. I interrupt his speedy monologue a couple times to ask for clarification. I'm a good learner. I've paid my $25.00 and I have a right to understand what is happening. He answers my questions, but doesn't take the hint to slow down. I look around the room to see if anyone else is anxious. They look attentive and no one makes eye contact with me. I decide not to ruin their workshop by asserting myself again.
>
> I leave totally drained. If I took anything from this learning experience, it's the feeling that it is hard work to take care of yourself as a learner in a learning environment that's not...not tailored to your needs, not protective in some way.

There are so many interesting questions related to this topic of a multilevel class where learners must advocate for themselves or leave empty-handed:.What strategies do I have for self-advocacy. How well do they work in a particular classroom environment. In what ways are they compatible or incompatible with the teacher's style and goals for the class, and if they aren't compatible will I/the learner develop and try new strategies? What is the impact of the learners and their strategies on the curriculum in the multilevel classroom?

An ESOL Math Setting

Meanwhile, I began co-teaching a math class with Lorrie Anderson at the Jewish Vocational Service English as a Second Language program in Brookline. This setting provided me with a new opportunity to look more in depth at my questions regarding self-advocacy. The math class includes learners from a variety of different countries. The levels of English proficiency as well as math facility are like stars spread out across the night sky. Deceptively close to the naked eye, but light years away from each other. In this class, Lorrie and I were definitely working hard to meet students' needs. Students' interactions with us had a profound effect on the steps we took to meet their needs.

The class meets for 90 minutes twice a week. Generally the class begins with a warm-up for everyone. Often these activities require manipulatives like cups or tiles and scarcity of materials makes it practical for students to work together. Students who are having trouble get individual attention. A longer group activity that will offer learning opportunities for everyone follows and then students have time to work independently on worksheets that reinforce or teach pencil and paper (closed number problems) with basic operations.

One of my primary purposes for co-teaching at JVS was to collect data for the A.L.R.I.'s evaluation. Annually the A.L.R.I., as part of SABES, takes the opportunity to reflect on its work, gathering feedback from the field through interviews or surveys and using this data to plan. As part of this year's evaluation on the impact of technical assistance on student outcomes, Lorrie and I kept journals of what happened in class. I was in class one time a week for five months. Although the primary goal was to observe and record student outcomes, when Lorrie and I debriefed and when I wrote in my journal, I found myself focusing mainly on how students were acting in class. For example,

> Most ignore their partners. It took some encouragement to get folks to come up to the board.
>
> I could see that J was working on her adding. She could do it if she tapped out the numbers as she went. In other words, six plus eight is not automatically 14 for her, but she could keep track of six, seven, eight, etc., until she managed eight numbers. When I went to begin to show her how to do division, R. interrupted me. I'll show her, she said. She turned the paper towards her, and took a deep breath and then began in Spanish.

During any of these class segments, but especially during times when students are supposed to work independently or in small groups, the challenge is for them to work along until they get it and they are done and can move on. What strategies do they use when they are stuck, can't get it, and can't finish and move on?

Attracting the Teacher

In my class observations, I began to notice that students seemed to have a preferred mode or strategy for operating in the classroom. The most common strategy during times when students were working individually or in pairs is to call out, "Teacher." This appeal for help usually succeeded in bringing Lorrie or me over. Usually help arrived within a minute or two (although we never had an independent observer time us). For some students this was their only strategy and so on the rare occasions when it took longer for one of us to arrive, H and R or M would get louder. They would begin to grumble to themselves or to me if I were within earshot but was helping another student. Recently J delivered an ultimatum. "You have no paper for me? I'm leaving."

F and L had entirely different strategies. F is a quiet type. She is a bit older than some of the other students who have young children. F did not have many years of schooling in her home country of Ethiopia. She can add and can multiply. Larger numbers require more time. Both she and her ally N are disgusted with practicing these operations. Her strategy is to sit. Her mouth rarely moves to smile or to chat with a peer or to participate. F wants to do long division. Lorrie and I on different occasions have taken what feels like a lot of time to explain the steps. We model it, go over the worksheet that gives an explanation and then do it again, asking for her to supply the next number or the next step. I realize that I have certain expectations of someone who is learning something new. I expect, for example, that she will offer more readily, ask a question, and show with her body language, by leaning into the problem, that she is actively listening. F doesn't meet my expectations, but that is a subject for future exploration. The important thing for now is that F's silence speaks to me. When she doesn't go along or try, she pricks my conscience. I interpret her silence to mean that the lesson or activity at hand is beyond her and she needs support. And when I ask her to confirm my interpretation, "Do you understand?" she says, "No."

LH is quiet too, however, she looks busier than F does. Left on her own, with fractions, addition, whatever, LH works. She manipulates the numbers, not always the way the paper or her teachers had in mind. Lorrie and I give her little bits of attention because we know she is less advanced than other students. We wonder how she can be so industrious when others who are more advanced are stuck and craving help. Yet she doesn't demand a lot of attention. Instead, LH keeps working after the class is over. She often stays for half an hour and takes advantage of the time Lorrie and I can spend with her then. Other students use this strategy of creating another opportunity for help as well. Occasionally S and N come in before class starts. Though Lorrie and I intend to be talking about the lesson or adding hand-outs to folders, we are instead working intensively one-on-one with the early students. This time feels so valuable to their progress that it is rewarding for all of us.

Aside from the requests for help, N's strategy has been the loudest to our ears. N has been pulling, pushing, tugging to make the teachers and the curriculum conform to her needs and expectations. Her primary strategy has been to critique the lessons. "Too easy." She often asserts what she needs. (If every student followed her lead, the multilevel class would really take its toll on us. . .) By asking repeatedly for what she wanted, N wore us down. Looking back, we never wanted or expected to teach fractions. It didn't come up in the first needs assessment. This class is funded to be beginning level. Many students need practice with basic operations before they can comfortably manipulate fractions, and yet, as soon as we finished budgeting, there we were.

Turning to Each Other

A strategy I would expect to see—students turning to each other for help—was not at the outset a favorite of this class. At least, I didn't see it; a more careful observer might have seen this happening in subtle, unobtrusive ways. When Lorrie and I took over the class, a number of students were promoted to the higher level math class. The remaining students continued working as they had before: they worked independently during class time on worksheet packets. The culture of the class seemed a quiet one. The first learners we met were four women from three different language groups. Perhaps their language and cultural differences kept them from the usual camaraderie and help students give each other in an ESOL or ABE class where the students share a primary language.

Higher level students sometimes think I am to be pitied in this situation.

On the other hand, if a higher level student sees someone else struggling, more and more often she offers to help. Many times this offer is made as a question to me, as a request for permission to act in this way. The first times a student in the know helped a struggling student were times when I initiated the request. I remember specific instances when I asked a higher level student, "Can you explain to . . . how you did this?" Perhaps I set the norm. I could have said to the struggling student, "Why don't you ask so and so for help?" Why didn't I do this? Implicit in my thinking are a few disturbing ideas: to help is an imposition and I am in a better position to ask for this favor than the student is. More likely I was worried that the struggling student would say, "No, I don't want this other person's help. I want yours," if given half a chance.

Sometimes help was offered before I asked for it. This has happened to me in other situations. Sometimes students who understand will intervene and ask to take over from me because I am having trouble giving a useful explanation. Maybe the struggling student and I are having a communication problem and the higher level student can take over and explain in the native language. Or equally likely, I am struggling because I don't want to give the answer. I want to provide the opportunity for the student to make the discovery. Higher level students sometimes think I am to be pitied in this situation. They can take over and explain and it will be less time-consuming and painful for all involved. They are right that it will take less time. I am not sure if they are right in that the student hears someone else's math rather than finding the sense or logic in it for themselves.

Another situation in which students helped each other is when Lorrie and I completely withdrew our help and we said explicitly, *you* can help each other, but *we* will not help you. After weeks of working on fraction concepts, we wanted to do a short pencil-and-paper-type of quiz. After taking the quiz, students would meet with us individually and have the opportunity to explain concepts with manipulatives. This would give each student more than one mode to show what she knew. Following a neat idea by an elementary or middle school math teacher, we wrote up a simple quiz. We gave the students the quiz and told them that they could work on it alone or with anyone they wanted to for 20 minutes. Then we would take the sheet away and give them a new copy of the same quiz. Students who recognized each others' strengths and made use of each others' expertise would benefit in their performance on the quiz. In this situation, students did turn to each other to a limited extent for help. At other times when Lorrie and I tried to give pencil-and-paper assessments, for students to be able to see their own progress as well as to show us, they talked quite a bit with each other. Lorrie had to keep interrupting them to break off the chatter.

In an interview with a student for the evaluation, I took the opportunity to test my perception of the class norm. I asked LH,

> MM: What do you do in math class when you are stuck?
> LH: I ask the teacher.
> MM: (I smile) You do that some, but sometimes you keep working, don't you?
> LK: Yes.
> MM: Why don't you ask another student?

LH: They laugh or they don't want to help.
MM: Why?
LH: Maybe they don't want to help. You might get better than them.
MM: You help M.
LH: I help her because she asked me, come sit over here. you can help me. I help so she doesn't get angry or sad, but sometimes I can get confused. [Meaning, I have to leave my own work in the middle and then I lose my place.]

It's not completely clear to me that LH was able to use the verb forms precisely enough to express her ideas. Was she saying students had laughed at her or they might laugh at her? Her idea that students are so competitive they wouldn't want to help each other was expressed as speculation, but what had given her the indication that students felt this competition? Was there an undercurrent of conversation in other languages that communicated these feelings or was this carried in some cues Lorrie and I unknowingly gave. LH's comments reminded me that though we did lots of group work, we never explicitly talked about teamwork, about how helping each other would help the whole class, etc. This lack of attention to teambuilding was undoubtedly a result of the open entry dynamic that characterized the first few weeks of class. The class went from four students to eight, then to twelve, with some learners attending only once. Finally a core of students started coming in mid-January and Lorrie told the counselor her class was no longer open to new students.

So What?

What do I learn from all this? What do I make of it? One could predict without in-depth research that in a multilevel class, the higher level students are more likely to get their needs met. Clearly, the better the students are in English, the more confidence they have. Therefore, when the teacher asks for feedback or ideas, the higher level students are the first and the quickest to answer. They are the most coherent. The more they talk, the more the curriculum shifts to meet their needs. Clearly N's audible criticisms of the curriculum had an impact on our planning. Confident people make their needs known.

However, good English was not the only strategy that succeeded in changing the direction of the curriculum. In a sense, dramatic—that is, visible—persistent appeals, were equally successful. The more dramatic the strategy, the more likely it is to have an effect on the pacing. Silence, in F's case, was just as persuasive as wordiness. At times it is difficult to separate English from drama. For example, N used both. Her body language spoke volumes, but her ability to communicate in English was also a useful tool.

But what of the students whom I haven't mentioned? Who don't or can't stay after class. Who are too shy to ask a peer for help. Who work diligently instead of quietly refusing. They are the students who slip between the cracks. One of the joys of teaching adults is that they don't act out the way children do. Discipline is rarely one of the energy drains of the job, and yet, perfect behavior can work against a student getting her needs met in a multilevel classroom.

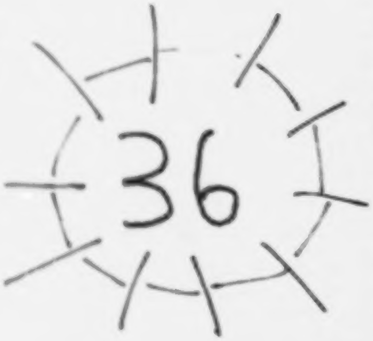
Lorrie and I have talked together about the students and their strategies, which appeals we want to answer, which feel disrespectful. When students call out repeatedly, though one of us has noted and acknowledged them, they seem to be saying, "I am the most important person in the class. You *have* to pay attention to me." Lorrie and I are doing our best, and too much assertiveness feels like an unreasonable demand. One student stands out as so aggressive that her calls for help generate more animosity than assistance. Teachers need to think about how to reinforce the behaviors they want to see.

This would make a fascinating topic for video taping or for an outside observer. Everyone reacts, intentionally or unintentionally, with subtle or not so subtle messages that affect those with whom we interact. Which strategies do we greet with smiles, or with a neutral response, or with a strong reaction, positive or negative? What messages do our reactions send?

Expanding and Modifying the Repertoire

The more strategies a student has, the more flexible she can be in advocating for herself in different educational settings. Lorrie and I created opportunities that would expand students' repertoires. We actively encouraged them to use or change strategies, first by building comfort and experience with new strategies:

- *Undermining the disappearing acts:* For students whose reticence tended to make them disappear, we started a warm-up that everyone could succeed at and that everyone had to talk some for. Lorrie or I wrote a number on the board (e.g., 36) and asked each student to give us two numbers that multiply or add together to make the number. Students who don't automatically know their nines tables could still say 35 + 1 or 30 + 6.



- *Working together:* We designed activities that would give students experience working together. If the purpose was really for students to work together, then we gave them one set of materials and a structure that reinforced the assignment. For example, to review math terms like "plus," "add," and "sum," we gave students cards with a symbol or word explaining an operation. They had to circulate and find someone who had a companion to theirs. This was so successful that, once in groups, students wrote the names of their group members on the board, along with the words and symbols of their groups and spontaneously made up a problem to illustrate their operation. When it is time for students to work in their packets, Lorrie always encourages students with the same hand-outs to sit together, to listen to her explanation together and to help each other. This works occasionally.
- *Leveling the playing field:* Most recently Lorrie and I have read aloud word problems with easy numbers. Students have to listen and write down their answers. Then Lorrie and I pick someone to send to the board. She becomes the scribe and other students have to tell her what to write. We usually pick a quiet student for this job; meanwhile, the other students who could write or answer the problem easily have to express themselves and their math process orally. It's clearly a struggle for everyone. If the student at the board doesn't understand, it isn't her fault and if she does, she can pretend not to, challenging the students giving oral instructions to be clearer. This activity clearly levels the playing field and helps students who are quiet and helps the group work together.

Then we looked at changing strategies, altering strategies to fit a new direction:

- *Giving direct feedback:* When a student's strategies backfire, what then? If a students' strategies are undermining their success, because they aren't compatible, or because they are successful in the classroom but won't be appropriate to other settings, the ideal would be to give students feedback. "I don't like it when you...yell at me from across the room more than once," for example.
- *Interrupting:* At times Lorrie and I have interrupted students when they were conversing in their native languages if we felt they would get more out of pushing themselves to speak English. We ask them what is going on if there is tension in the class.

Implications for Other Settings

There is no way for any teacher to know first-hand which strategies students will use in other situations when they want answers to their own questions or need to ask for help. Since school is such a formal setting with rules that even students with little schooling seem to know, I wouldn't be surprised if students use an entirely different set of strategies outside the classroom. Yet I have this nagging feeling that the one most common strategy—relying on the teacher, the authority figure to answer the question—is so comfortable that this strategy might be the one students prefer in any setting. In my experience, relying on the authority figure is a mistake in many settings. For example, if a worker always saves her questions for the supervisor, she will reveal to the supervisor her lack of knowledge and possibly mistakes as well. In many employment situations it is important to save face with a supervisor, to learn from peers all that one can. In many situations, adults have to wait in line: the post office, the bank, bureaucracies. We can't always run up to someone in charge to find out which line is the right line. We have to piece together the information, and asking others is often the best strategy. And that is why I so much want them to have practice asking each other, learning from each other, and revising an answer from a peer that is maybe only half right using information they have that is a different but also true piece of the puzzle.

Conclusion

I recently met two new math classes. These groups are native speakers of English, and in my time with them we'll be learning math by developing a stronger intuitive feel for numbers and operations. With my recent experience in mind, I'm observing the class and talking to the lead teachers.

From the beginning, I'm carefully observing students' strategies, in particular those that might work against them. I've learned about one student's double-edged strength. She saves all her work and has all her papers well organized. She has repeated the pre-GED class for a few cycles so now she is able to do homework assignments from the book by going home, finding the same paper from the previous semester or year, and filling in the answers again.

I plan to talk with the groups about the question, "What is your job in math class?" I want all the individuals to be aware that the group can succeed as opposed to the competitive spirit that LH mentioned.

I'm still struggling with what it means to create an environment where students have the opportunity to perfect different strategies. I know that dramatic strategies are some of the most effective, but I'm wary of creating a dynamic where every need is a melodrama acted out for my benefit. I plan to monitor my own behavior in classes where I am the learner. The only way to pursue this topic seems to be to observe from the inside as well as from a true observer's perspective. •

Ask Ms. Multi

Part 2

Since Miss Manners was not available to answer questions about how to behave appropriately in a multilevel class, her cousin, Ms. Multi, agreed to answer teachers' questions. Ms. Multi has the same ironic tone as her better-known cousin, but she assured us that her responses are of the most serious nature.

Dear Ms. Multi:
I have had it, plain and simple. I have such a range of abilities, interests, ages, ethnic groups, and so on in my class I can't seem to get a handle on where to begin unless I do total individualized instruction. However, there are 23 students in my class and I have no tutors. Some are new arrivals to this country and need much more cross-cultural orientation than others who have been here for years and need more advanced work to prepare for the GED or EDP. Help! *Ms. Frazzle*

Dear Ms. Frazzle:
Ms. Multi suspects this is a policy issue, not a classroom issue. First of all, a class of 23 students is simply too BIG! Sometimes it is necessary to stand up at a staff meeting and proclaim: Enough! We have to set some limits! The class has a right to an identity of its own! No one is being served! Ms. Multi wonders if your program has examined this issue thoroughly and has brainstormed other ways you may structure your classes. Try bringing it up as an agenda item for your next staff meeting. (Ms. Multi assumes you have staff meetings and that teachers are encouraged to contribute to the agenda. If not, there's an even bigger problem here....)

—

Dear Ms. Multi:
How does one handle it when "higher" students in a class display impatience toward less advanced classmates? *Curious*

Dear Curious:
Ms. Multi will not tolerate rude, unkind, or hurtful behavior in her classroom, and she makes this explicit in the beginning of each cycle when she negotiates with students the guiding principles, or "ground rules," of the class. These rules address how students should treat each other. You have not described how these "higher" students are displaying their impatience, however. Name calling, spitting, disparaging comments in *sotto voce* are never to be accepted or ignored. Fidgeting, sighing, looking out the window at the street cleaners, and other signs of impatience tell Ms. Multi, however, that, though students are trying to contain their impatience, they need to be challenged more, or the pace of the class might need to be re-evaluated. Ms. Multi also thinks that the higher level students should have the right to a challenging class, as you would, I am sure, agree. Her advice is: set limits on anything unkind, but provide opportunities for the go-getters to shine as often as you ask for tolerance for the less advanced to struggle through an answer. Keep talking about this balance you are trying to achieve with your students so they are explicitly aware of what's going on.

—

Dear Ms. Multi:
How do you deal with upper level students always providing lower level students with the answers? Asking them not to do this and explaining that it is not helping their classmates to learn does not seem to help.
Frustrated

Dear Frustrated:
Ms. Multi implores you not to get angry at the upper level students; they may be following a deeply ingrained cultural imperative to work collectively so others do not lose face. Perhaps you could work on this situation by eliminating the power struggle. That is, group or pair the upper level students together and group or pair the lower level students together. That way, the lower level students may be willing to take more risks among themselves and the upper level students can move ahead a little more quickly. They can all start out together in the introductory phase of the class.

—

Dear Ms. Multi:
I have 9 students: 1 Spanish speaker, Stella, and 8 Cantonese speakers. I am European American, but I have a fair amount of fluency in Cantonese, and I tend to clarify things in that language. I'm afraid Stella is getting left out. What can I do? *Xie Xie*

Dear Xie Xie,
Have you discussed this issue with the students or tried to find out how Stella feels (through a dialogue journal, for example, or through discussion after class?) Or how the other students feel? Sometimes in adult ed. classes we have this "elephant in the living room" phenomenon—there's a very visible thing going on but no one talks about it. Ms. Multi likes to "foreground" these issues via problem-posing scenarios, or even direct discussions with students so they can all be a part of discussing guidelines to make sure people feel included. Then, as you develop guidelines in class (when it's OK to use the native language, etc) you will have depersonalized the issue and will be better prepared as new students enter the class and change the composition yet again. Ms. Multi also suggests that you try to find issues that are of concern to all the women in the class to ensure unity in the subject matter of your teaching. Do the women all work? Are they all parents? Will they be affected by recent legislation regarding immigrants? Ms. Multi assumes, of course, that you already provide opportunities for Stella to share some aspects of her language and culture with the rest of you. She also assumes that you are trying to learn a little Spanish? If not, perhaps you might try to let Stella teach the rest of you!

—

Dear Ms. Multi:
How can I do everything and do it well? I really believe my students deserve my time and attention. I plan individual lessons and a group lesson for my 13 students, who are very different in abilities and interests. They need assistance with so many things beyond the academic, though, and I feel they just don't get the support they need other places in their lives, so I try to help as much as I can. In addition to teaching, I spend a lot of time solving problems for them, dealing with health, work, tenant and other issues in their lives, one on one. I help take care of their kids. I am even sheltering a woman student from an abusive relationship right now. I am trying so hard to be student centered, but.... *Cares Too Much*

Dear Cares:
Ms. Multi empathizes with you and suggests that, first and foremost, you unplug the phone, have a cup of chamomile tea, and go take a nap. When you awake refreshed, try doing the following. Take out your journal (Ms. Multi assumes you have one; a notebook will do just as well) and reflect upon your boundaries. Boundaries are where you can reasonably draw limits between yourself and, in this case, your students. If you have no boundaries, you will simply burn yourself out within a couple of years and have no resources to draw from to continue teaching. (Christina Maslach has written a book called *Burnout, the Cost of Caring.*) Ms. Multi strongly urges you to think about where you can comfortably say no to students so you will have room for your own life. Also, perhaps you can think a bit about your ultimate goal for your students. Are there ways you can help them to become more self-directed and resourceful on their own or with each other rather than depending so much on you? Brokering and rehearsing situations with them may promote more self-reliance than your solving the problems for them. More referrals might help as well. You may also gain some perspective by talking to more veteran teachers who have faced and come to terms with this issue. Ms. Multi agrees that your students deserve the best. So do you.

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Not So Inexperienced After All

Tom Lynch

During the day I coordinate a Housing Assistance Program and supervise a couple of carpenters to provide minor repairs and major rehabilitation for elderly and disabled homeowners. I am also a part-time ESOL teacher. In this article I will share my perceptions of "multilevel" as it applies to tutors and teachers in adult education and its connections to staff development.

I started teaching ESOL in 1967 while working as a parish priest in Mexico. My parish was located in a small mountain village seventeen kilometers from Cuernavaca. Because my parishioners were poor farmers and could not contribute much to support the church's efforts, I decided to find a job to supplement our income. Fortunately, I learned of a position teaching English in a small business school in Cuernavaca. I applied and so began the first of my many teaching experiences in ESOL. After Mexico, I continued tutoring part-time for a couple of years while working for a bank in New York City until I left to take a position with a Rhode Island bank. My students in New York were mainly aspiring young professionals who were struggling to make the transition to careers for which they either began training in their own country or which they had selected after they came to this country.

After a hiatus, about two years ago I decided to return to teaching ESOL. I looked around for opportunities to volunteer and for courses available through continuing education programs. It wasn't long before I began working as a volunteer, tutoring at La Alianza Hispana in Roxbury. Coincidentally, a friend made me aware of staff development opportunities available for ESOL teachers at the Adult Literacy Resource Institute, the Boston Regional Support Center for SABES.

At the moment I teach two different ESOL classes and I am a tutor trainer for the Healthy Boston Project of the city of Boston. My ESOL students come from Central America, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Ecuador and Mexico. My students range in educational background from those who are pre-literate to two university trained professionals, one an electrical engineer, the other an abdominal surgeon. I think multilevel would be an appropriate description of my students.

My Staff Development

Last November I participated in a four-session mini-course at A.L.R.I. The course, "ESOL Literacy: Basics and Beyond," introduced meaning-based approaches to adult literacy in which learning is a collaborative effort between teachers and learners regarding the content of the curriculum and how it is taught. I hesitated before signing up for this multilevel course, though I had had prior ESOL teaching experience. I don't have a Master's Degree in Education, Linguistics or ESOL, and sometimes that makes me feel self-conscious when I'm around teachers with more formal training. (I have come to realize, however, that I am not entirely an inexperienced teacher after all.) In my other life I attended graduate school in psychology at a big name New York City school. The atmosphere was very cliquish and I came away from that experience with some rather unpleasant memories. I guess I anticipated the more experienced ESOL teachers might react similarly to my lack of teaching credentials and under-cut my teaching experience.

A couple of things helped me overcome my discomfort. First, the ESOL community, on the whole, has been one of the more supportive I've encountered. Once the mini-course started, I was made to feel most welcome. It demonstrated that a newcomer or less experienced teacher would not be made to feel unwelcome or ignored. Second, and more important, I have come to recognize and appreciate my talents through my students' eyes. I am fortunate to possess natural teaching skills and I bring valuable knowledge in other important areas to the classroom. After leaving Mexico, I worked as a banker in trust administration for fifteen years, followed by running my own construction business for ten years, and for the last six years I have coordinated a housing program for a non-profit agency. My lifetime training in the priesthood, business and as a case worker, together with my classroom experience, has helped me successfully relate to my students, identify their particular needs, and assist them with learning problems that I struggled with as well.

ESOL Literacy: Basics and Beyond
A Mini-Course for ESOL Teachers

Adult Literacy Resource Institute
Fall, 1996

After dealing with my initial hesitation, I approached the mini-course with enthusiasm. I looked forward to connecting with other ESOL teachers in a learning environment. For the most part I liked the mini-course. I really learned a lot in a short period of time through the hands-on approach. The trainers not only explained the meaning-based approaches currently used in ESOL but helped clarify key differences as they walked us through real-time learning situations. The exercises were not only relevant but challenging. I enjoyed them and, judging from others' reactions, I think most everyone else enjoyed them as well.

As I thought about the mini-course later, I recognized the multilevel flavor of the class and the trainers combined to create an animated and productive learning environment. While we mirrored the diversity our students bring to the classroom, the educational, cultural and experiential diversity of the group added to the meaning of multilevel when applied to the teachers. We were different colors, ages, and sexes and had different educational backgrounds; a good percentage had a master's degree or higher; others are still studying for their degrees. Then there were those, like myself, who improved their skills by attending mini-courses and workshops. In addition, there were a couple of participants and one trainer whose first language was not English; they added yet another important dimension to our multilevel learning experience.

While I learned a lot from observing individual reactions during the open exchange and working with others in the small group exercises, I paid particular attention to those for whom English was not their first language. I was particularly interested to hear what they had to say about the language training they received and what benefits they saw or experienced from using the meaning-based approach. Their appreciation and endorsement of the meaning-based approach helped convince me not only to reevaluate how I prepare lesson plans but how I will actively involve my students in the process.

This multilevel group, particularly the more experienced teachers, helped me analyze and digest the course material more comfortably. And yet, even though the mini-course was stimulating, I felt let down afterward. As a part-time ESOL teacher and volunteer with a full-time job, I don't always have the opportunity to share ideas with colleagues. As a result, I felt a bit frustrated as I began to implement what I had learned. I looked around for opportunities for follow-up. While I wasn't immediately aware of the opportunities available, I was fortunate enough to learn from an A.L.R.I. staff member that the A.L.R.I. (and other SABES Regional Support Centers in Massachusetts) offers ongoing support to area teachers at programs funded by the state Department of Education, *if they seek it out.* A.L.R.I. staff can visit classes, team-teach, etc. However, there are many literacy programs in the Boston region and only a small number of resource people who go out into the field. So programs also need to be creative in finding ways to offer support to new teachers, such as co-teaching, teacher observation, teacher research, and other staff development possibilities that link teachers of various abilities, interests and talents.

On-line Staff Development

One way teachers can become involved in staff development, no matter what level they are at, is to explore the opportunities on-line. Not too long ago I happened to be browsing the stacks of the A.L.R.I. library, looking for information about on-line teaching and e-mail communication. I came across a report entitled "ESL On-line Action Research." It was a report on a collaborative venture between two adult education programs in Pennsylvania to create an infrastructure to support state-wide practitioner research by linking them to a telecommunications venue. Using this infrastructure, Pennsylvania practitioners were able to communicate with their colleagues on a state and national level, at any time of the day or night, thereby reducing practitioner isolation.

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The summary of the "ESL On-line Action Research" findings suggested that on-line action research holds great promise as an avenue for on-going professional development for adult educators. Not only does it help to create a sense of community among practitioners who, for a variety of reasons, have very little opportunity for regular collegial interaction, but it also exposes practitioners to the wealth of information about their field. Further, the practitioner research process gives adult educators a systematic way of examining their practice and making important decisions about day to day activities. The combination of practitioner research, Internet technology and collegial interaction creates a powerful professional development tool that adult education practitioners find exciting and insightful.

> ***...the educational, cultural and experiential diversity of the group added to the meaning of multi-level when applied to the teachers.***

We are truly in an information society where time is measured in nano-seconds. Now more than ever, those of us in the field of ESOL need to be able to find ways to enhance professional development, maintain communication with one another and improve our support systems. In light of the many advantages the Internet offers in the delivery and exchange of information, the possibilities it offers for professional development seem unlimited. I have been on-line now for about a year and a half. In that time, I have found a wealth of ESOL information that I might not have had time to access otherwise. It has opened up new connections to others in the field through an e-mail exchange on the local ESOL-M Listserv. This discussion group provides the ESOL community an opportunity to interact with one another in the fastest way possible, short of normal conversation. Through e-mail we can now consult with each other about materials, lesson plans, administrative tasks, grammar points and cross-cultural communication issues, to mention but a few topics.

In addition to our local connection, there is an international listserv, TESL-L, managed through CUNY in New York City, that offers a wide range of postings describing activities, resources and other related newsgroups that discuss topics of interest to ESOL teachers. TESOL also offers on-line mini-courses. This past spring they returned with an on-line course based on the book by Marie Wilson Nelson, *At the Point of Need: Teaching Basic and ESL Writers,* discussing the language experience approach which teachers with a whole language philosophy implement. There are other interesting web sites, like "Dave's ESL Cafe," which offer a wealth of ESOL resources.

Today in adult education we are facing another challenge to create a new professional development prototype which builds on previous delivery models and continues to be responsive to the needs of the multilevel group of practitioners. My hope is that we are successful in incorprating new ideas and new technology into our professional development support system. •

Was It Worth It?

Margaret McPartland

I have been asked to write an article about my experiences, good and bad, attending adult education workshops and mini-courses and how I have felt being in workshops with teachers of varying degrees of experience and exposure to the subject.

When a staff member at the A.L.R.I./SABES Greater Boston Regional Support Center referred to me as an "experienced" teacher, I thought to myself, "What is she talking about? I haven't been doing this that long." Five years have gone by fast. In that time, in various teaching positions I have taught reading and math classes from the basic literacy level through the GED level. In order to do so effectively, I know that I have a lot to learn.

My background upon entering the adult literacy field was in business, not education, and the first program at which I worked had only one other teacher, who also had no experience, so the workshops were my sole connection to experienced teachers. During the first year, I think I went to every workshop in sight, regardless of the subject matter. I wanted to digest as much information as possible and try out whatever seemed relevant to my work. I also wanted to absorb the knowledge of the other more experienced teachers and hear their anecdotes about class. Naturally, I was one of the least experienced teachers at these workshops. At the time, I didn't feel inferior, but at the bigger workshops like Network '93, I did not say much; I know that sometimes the best way to learn is to listen carefully.

After a few months, I noticed that the most "experienced" teachers at the workshops had, at most, about three to four years of teaching experience. Rarely, did I meet anyone with more experience than that. Sometimes attendance at workshops was sparse, which surprised me, since the presenters were very helpful. In fact, in my first year I remember attending a series of workshops about GED preparation that was only attended by me and the director of the A.L.R.I. I couldn't understand why more teachers didn't attend. I wanted to learn from them too. However, I did gain some new teaching strategies from the experienced presenters.

After the first year and a half, I decided not to go to everything in sight. I started to analyze my strengths and weaknesses in teaching and focused more on the workshops that addressed my weaknesses. I attended several workshops and mini-courses on reading and learning disabilities, which I can still never learn enough about. I noticed that many of the other teachers at these workshops had about the same level of experience as I did. I felt more comfortable sharing classroom experiences, since I now had several to choose from.

Last year, I attended a mini-course, "Introduction to the Internet," which made me feel like a novice again. Luckily, everyone else in attendance had the same level of experience with the Internet—that is, none—so I felt comfortable even though I knew nothing at the beginning of the course. The presenters seemed to understand our apprehension. They made us feel comfortable by encouraging us to chat with each other as we worked on the activities they prepared. Every once in a while, I run into someone from the workshop, and we share what we have been doing on the Internet since.

This past year, I have been reflecting on the teaching knowledge I have gained over the past several years. Sometimes, I wonder if I was a better teacher in that first year when I knew absolutely nothing about "teaching." Some of the methods I used back then didn't correspond to what is viewed as "good" teaching, but they worked. For example, I used reading materials that are considered much too easy for a GED class, I made people write the same essay over and over again, and I did not know what the word "manipulative" meant, at least not as it pertains to mathematics. However, even though at that time I worked with a difficult, transient population, a high percentage of students reached their goals. The results were about the same as, if not better than now, even with all this methodology in my head.

Does that mean that my attendance at all of these workshops was a waste of time? I don't feel that way. I don't know if I am necessarily a better teacher, a worse teacher, or the same teacher as I was back then. But I feel that I would be a much worse, if not stale teacher, if I didn't attend. I do not use every piece of information I obtain at the workshops, at least not right away. Sometimes the handouts sit in a box for a few months and then I discover them and try them. Sometimes I leave a workshop thinking I will not use anything, but later come across a situation in which the information becomes relevant. I have also learned from the experiences of the other teachers at the workshops, even if they hadn't been teaching as long as I have; they undoubtedly have something to offer to the group. Since I have to teach several different types of classes each week, including basic literacy, not just GED, I find I need to draw from the knowledge I gained from at least some of those workshops.

Lately, in order to keep from getting stale, I have attended workshops that address some of my self-described strengths: math and writing. In one math workshop in particular, I did have more teaching experience than almost everyone else. That really surprised me. However, being in a workshop with less experienced teachers did not bother me, because I do remember what it was like that first year. I also shared more than I usually do. Actually, the presenter had a lot more experience than I did, and even though I know the contents of the GED Math Test inside out, I picked up several new strategies from her workshop which I tried out right away with success.

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I feel that no matter how much experience a teacher has, he or she can always learn new and effective teaching methods, whether it be from the presenter, the others in a workshop, or both. How much a person can learn depends on their mindset walking into the room, just as much as students' initial mindsets affect their openness to learning.

Whether exposure to alternative teaching methods will necessarily produce better success rates is hard to say. As I examine what I mentioned earlier about whether I am a better or worse teacher, I recognize that other factors besides teaching methods can positively or negatively influence success rates, such as teachers' working conditions and students' life conditions. I can't control these factors, but I can try to influence students' rates of success in goal achievement by trying to make myself a better teacher. This cannot be done in isolation. Just as students learn from each other, teachers need to do the same. •

Notes on Contributors

Lenore Balliro has worked as the ESOL Coordinator at the A.L.R.I. since 1988. This volume of *Connections* is her final project there; she moves over to World Education in September to edit the statewide adult education newsletter, *Bright Ideas*.

Joan Bruzzese and Nellie Dedmon are teachers at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge. Joan has been teaching there for about 20 years and is a 1970 GED graduate of the CLC. She teaches math, reading and writing. She likes to listen to music, dance, read, solve crossword puzzles, and play solitaire on the computer. Nellie teaches math and pre-GED and is also the coordinator of Project LIFT, a homeless drop-in program at CLC. She enjoys reading, doing crossword puzzles, and spending time with her friends and family, including her many wonderful grandchildren. She has been teaching at the CLC for about 22 years and is also a GED graduate of the CLC.

Richard Goldberg teaches ABE at the Asian American Civic Association in Boston's Chinatown. His program prepares immigrant adults for community college, job training, and alternative high school diploma classes.

Tom Lynch coordinates the Housing Assistance Program for ESAC, the Ecumenical Social Action Committee, in Jamaica Plain and is a volunteer ESOL tutor at La Alianza Hispana in Roxbury.

Margaret McPartland has been teaching ABE/GED for five years, most recently at Jackson Mann Community Center and Roxbury Community College.

Marta Mangan-Lev teaches in a community-based program in Chicopee. She is a participant in or leader of many SABES activities. She lives with her partner and their son and spends her free time in the garden or on the water.

Martha Merson is the ABE/Literacy Specialist at the A.L.R.I./SABES Greater Boston Regional Support Center. She wants learning, classroom based research, and creativity to always be a big part of her life.

Ms. Multi: See Lenore Balliro

Emily Singer has been teaching ESL in workplace, college, and community adult education programs since 1991. Her particular interest is working with adult learners to research career and educational opportunities.

Janet Stein came to adult literacy in 1984 as a volunteer at Push Literacy Action Now (PLAN), a community-based program in Washington, DC. Since then she has administered and taught all levels and subjects at a variety of ABE programs in the Boston area. She currently teaches math to adults at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge and feels extremely fortunate to have dedicated students with excellent attendance.

Cara Streck is the Curriculum Coordinator for the Adult Learning Program at Project Hope in Dorchester, where she has taught for the past six years. She is also a teacher in the RCC Prep program at Roxbury Community College. Cara loves math (really!) and enjoys using the skills she learned as a math consultant and textbook editor to help students work through their math anxiety to a place where they feel confident and competent. Cara lives in Dorchester with her two dogs, Bandit and Mandy, one cat, Arabella, and many plants, including a hibiscus she's had for over 25 years.

Judy Waters began teaching in the Brookline Public Schools as an instructional aide and substitute teacher, grades K-12. Before starting her current position as Family Literacy Teacher/Coordinator at the Jackson Mann Community Center, she taught ESOL at the Haitian Multi-Service Center and was a reading tutor/intern at the Community Learning Center in Cambridge. Recently she attended the National Family Literacy Conference in Louisville, Kentucky.

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